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ANNE T. JORDAN

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**THE EMERGENCE OF IRISH ACCESS POLICY
AND PRACTICE IN THE 1990s**

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EdD)

APRIL 2002

Declaration

No element of the work described in this dissertation, nor the dissertation itself, has been previously submitted for a degree at this or any other institution. The work described in this dissertation has been carried out entirely by the author.

Anne T. Jordan

April 2002

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Abstract

The focus of this study is the provision of Access courses for Irish adults. This interest arose from the researcher's involvement with Access initiatives in one Irish higher education institution.

The principal research questions investigate the development of the policies and practices associated with the Access movement in Ireland. The research begins from the theoretical, and narrows down to an examination of policies and perceptions, then to initiatives, and finally to the experiences and voices of a small number of Access students. Action research methodology, selected as an appropriate approach for a practitioner working in the field, is used to investigate these questions.

In attempting to answer the principal research questions, the study examines the definitions and rationales for Access. This leads to a categorisation of such rationales in terms of equity, economic and social factors, and those connected with personal development.

A comparative analysis of world-wide trends and EU educational policy and provision in a number of selected countries is next undertaken, prior to an examination of recent Irish Access policy. The comparative research report commissioned by the Irish government from Professor Skilbeck was not foreseen when this study began, but it is such an important recent influence on Irish policy that it is given serious consideration.

The study moves from an examination of policy to that of practice.

A national survey of Access course providers is carried out to show the extent and nature of Access provision. At a more local level, the outcomes for a selected group of Access students are examined, including the experiences of a small number of students from this group. From these a number of key issues arise and are considered.

The answer to the research questions posed is that a conflation of economic investment in education; social cohesion strategies; membership of the EU; equity awareness, the 'Celtic Tiger' and an increased demand by adults for education are the forces driving Access in Ireland. Analysis of representations by one group, and reinforced by the

survey of Access students show that students represent the least source of influence on Access policy and practice. The study demonstrates that education is now conceived as an 'absolute good', capable of tackling many ills in society.

The research concludes with a SWOT analysis showing the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats that arise in relation to the expansion of Access opportunities in Ireland. This is followed by a number of key points for practice and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 1. Introduction and Overview of the Study

The focus of this research is on the provision of Access¹ courses for Irish adults in the Republic of Ireland. This type of course provision has been commonplace in the UK and Australia for the last twenty years or more, and before that, in the US since the 1960's, but barely existed in Ireland prior to the 1990's. One reason for this was that, due to the scarcity of higher education places and a highly competitive selection system, access to higher education for Irish adults was traditionally very difficult. In consequence, Ireland was only admitting less than three per cent of adults into the full-time higher education system by the early 1990s (Clancy, 1995a, p.41), in comparison with the UK which had at this same time up to thirty per cent of full-time mature students (Parry, 1995, p.104).² Moreover, neither the government nor the educational institutions themselves demonstrated much interest in allocating scarce and highly sought places to older learners who had not been through the traditional Irish higher education selection procedure of the Leaving Certificate (Murphy & Inglis, 2000, p.101).

My particular interest in such course provision arose from some funding opportunities which arose in 1994 in my own institution, the Midshire Institute of Technology (MIT),³ one of fourteen such establishments providing higher education in the Irish state binary higher education system. I stress the funding, since it is my view that many developments in Irish *higher and further education over the last ten years have been driven, as much by the provision of funding from bodies such as the European Union, and in particular the European Social Fund, as by the recognition of need from the Department of Education and Science.* It has been noted by Wagner (2002, p.1.) that internationally there has been an upsurge of demand for Access associated with dynamic national economic

¹ To avoid confusion I have followed the practice of Davies and Parry (1993, p.4) in capitalising 'Access' in order to differentiate the intended meaning of 'access to third level education' from the other connotations of the term.

² In 1995 only 2% of these were over 26 compared to 19% in western countries (Lee, 1998).

³ The name is fictitious, in order to mask the identity of Institute students and staff.

performance. This national upturn was beginning to be evident in Ireland in the mid-nineties but would not explain Access funding prior to that time.⁴

In 1994 –5, I was working in the Adult Education Department in the Institute,⁵ teaching courses mainly in the areas of the social sciences, business and the humanities. A community group from a nearby large corporation housing estate with unemployment levels of forty three per cent (WAP,1997, p.4) approached the Adult Education Department with a small amount of funding they had raised (£Ir.14,000.00), and asked if the Department could put on an Access course for disadvantaged adults from the area, that would help them in gaining entry to mainstream college courses.⁶ I was asked to co-ordinate this course and began with student recruitment, which was not envisaged as being difficult, given that the request for the course had arisen from the community itself. To my surprise it proved difficult to recruit anyone at all from the inner city and the twelve places on offer were immediately snapped up, some by 'opportunistic' middle class adults from outside the catchment area. This led to my realisation that the recognition of a 'need' is not necessarily equivalent to a demand that the 'need' be satisfied, and that even the expression of the 'demand' does not entail commitment or motivation. In order to be wholly successful in recruiting members from the target group we would need to have started much further back, in tackling disadvantage in the primary and secondary school systems. However, once underway the course itself was successful in that eight of the twelve participants did go on to higher education, mainly within the Institute, and there was only one drop-out.

MIT's next venture in the field of Access was via Horizon EU EMPLOYMENT funding, aimed at tackling social exclusion. We gained matched funds of over a quarter of a million ecus for a two- year project entitled 'Access for Mature Students to Higher Education' (AMSHE) centred around Access provision . Part of the EU's requirement for this project was

⁴ In fact the EU was the most prominent source of funding until the late 90s.

⁵ At that time Midshire Regional Technical College.

⁶ Very few students from the Cloncurry Estate at this time would have had the necessary points to be selected for full-time college courses. One of the community workers stated that there was a feeling that the Institute, although adjacent to the Estate, was completely closed to its local community.

to provide nationally recognised accreditation, so we designed three Access programmes for adults: one in Science and Technology, a second in Art and Design and a third in Business/Humanities. All were duly accredited by the National Council for Educational Awards (the NCEA is the Irish equivalent of what was the Council for National Academic Awards - CNAAB in the UK), and became the first nationally accredited Access courses in the Republic. As a consequence of our funding, we were also able to put in support measures such as student mentoring and tutor training which are not a normal part of course provision nor standard funding from the Irish Department of Education and Science. In the event we ran two of the three accredited Access programmes in the year 1996/7 – our college would not allow us to run the Art and Design strand, principally for resource reasons. Again, these programmes were quite successful in terms of the outcomes and progression for participants, but not very successful in terms of raising the profile of Access students or programmes, which were still seen very much as a marginal activity for the institution. When this project came to an end I was convinced that educational guidance had to be a key element if we were to be serious about widening participation for adults. At that time, in 1997 there was no educational guidance in the Republic available to adults,⁷ only to people in certain priority groups such as the long-term unemployed, for labour market purposes.

For the subsequent EU Integra EMPLOYMENT project beginning in 1998, we designed a regional educational guidance service for one region of Ireland (REGSA), which ran for two years up to 1999. This has since been taken over by the Department of Education and Science as one of its adult guidance projects, with its future now well-secured.⁸

By the year 2000 my day-to-day involvement in Access provision had ceased, and I became more heavily involved in staff development and pedagogical activity in the Institute. However, the five years during which I

⁷ The Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) operating from Belfast, and funded from the UK was in effect the only service handling educational guidance queries from adults for the whole island.

⁸ Both the AMSHE and REGSA projects have been described in a number of papers and publications, including Jordan, A. (1997b) *The Institutional Response to Access*, and Jordan, A. (ed.) (1999) *Looking for Something in the Dark*.

had been involved with Access were hectic but productive ones, and led me both to a national involvement in the Irish Access phenomenon and an interest in researching the whole area of Access, and in utilising action research methodologies to do so.

The choice of methodology for this research was dictated by my involvement in Access initiatives at a particular point in time. The principal research question therefore aims to investigate the development of the policies, principles and practices associated with Access. Action research approaches therefore offered the best means of describing, analysing and reporting on action, from the viewpoint of someone deeply involved in this action (McKernan, 1996, p.3). *The research itself begins from the theoretical and the conceptual and narrows down to an examination of policies and perceptions, from then to initiatives, and finally down to the experiences, and voices of a small number of Access students.*

The justification for the comparative perspective which plays a large part in this research is that there are significant lessons for policy and practice to be learnt from Access provision in other countries (Jarvis, 1993, p.405). For example, the Australian experience of widening participation through Access in the 1980's highlighted the resentment felt by school-leavers when anticipated university places were taken up by adults. What was needed therefore was the creation of additional Access places, rather than a competitive scramble by Access, mature and traditional students for existing university places (Postle, 1995, p.12). A different, though not long-term solution emerged in New Zealand - a country with a tradition of welcoming adult students, often without entry qualifications, into higher education, and in which adults came to dominate. There the government had to put in place a policy of 'Study right' that gave higher rates of funding for the traditional younger student (Wagner, 2002, p.1). We too in Ireland are now having to consider an overall Access policy, linked to an increase in the provision of places in the Irish higher education sector, though within the context of a demographic downturn that will see fewer applications from the traditional school-leaver (Flynn, 2002).

The overall rationale for the research is to examine the implications for practitioners of the development of Access policies and practices. It is sometimes the case that here in Ireland we fail to consider the implications of 'best practice' elsewhere. For example, in the past the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the-then National Council for Educational Awards⁹ were keen to promote the model of Access utilised by the Scottish Wider Access Scheme (SWAP) but without the key guarantee of Access that this scheme, developed by the Scottish universities, was able to offer (Spackman, 1995, p. 81). That said, the universities as autonomous bodies are in a better position to guarantee places than the institutes of technology which have been subject to huge pressures from school leavers within their regions. However, the recent projected demographic drop in the number of Irish school-leavers - thirty per cent between 1999 and 2015 (Hayden, 2001, p.2) - should create a change of attitude and a keener interest in adult students. It is noteworthy that a major report on the Irish higher education admission system, 'The Report of the Points Commission', (Hyland, 1999) recommends that Access courses in Ireland should not be called by that name since only a few of them do guarantee access to higher education; they merely improve the chances for candidates (p.112).

There are other questions to be asked in relation to the implications for practitioners, which are especially pertinent for my own institution, since MIT has recently set up a learning and student support department¹⁰ having responsibility for Access, attrition initiatives, educational guidance and community and literacy initiatives. These questions include the nature of the commitment to Access provision from key staff in institutions like my own, and the extent to which lip-service is being paid to the concept, since the Irish Department of Education and Science has since 1999 provided dedicated funding for Access initiatives. Anecdotal evidence from the sector suggests that this funding has not always been greeted with eagerness, and in some establishments has even caused bemusement, with one institution initially using the funds to buy Personal Organisers for its students - taken

⁹ Since June 2001, the Higher Education and Training Awards Authority.

¹⁰ The first of its kind in the country, though the approach to situate Access within a wider range of student support services may be found in other countries, as in the Flemish Community of Belgium (Wagner, 2002, p.1).

back when the “Sunday Tribune” newspaper got hold of the story (Duffy 2002). An official from the government department stated to me that no more money would be forthcoming for Access initiatives unless the funds already allocated were properly utilised (Kelly, 2000).

Other questions range from whether the provision of Access programmes is sufficient in itself to promote genuine equality of opportunity, to what institutional support is needed to facilitate Access. Evidence from the Access Made Available (AMA) group of Irish university Access Officers who have held these positions now for the past five years suggests that promising attempts are now being made to grapple with appropriate support for Access students (AMA, 1999).

This research adopts the principle of progressive focusing in order to highlight, analyse and explain the phenomena of Access policy and practice. Chapter 2 examines the primary and secondary research questions on which this study is based, and which have been raised in general terms in the paragraphs above. Chapter 3 focuses on Access in general terms, beginning with *some key definitions, theoretical justifications and models of Access structures*. In order that Access initiatives can be fully understood, Chapter 4 investigates some global, and European trends leading to Access provision, before looking in Chapter 5 at examples of this provision from selected countries. Chapter 6 which is a key chapter, and therefore longer than most, focuses on the Republic of Ireland, beginning with an examination of Irish government policy on Access provision up to the present time. This will incorporate an examination of the role in policy formation and practice of three major stakeholders: the state through the Irish Dept of Education and Science; the academic oligarchies, and the target group for Access. It may be argued that the economic sector should also be considered as a stakeholder, but their input to recent Irish educational policy has been a much broader one, focusing on strategies for work-based learners in general as in their submission to the Irish ‘White Paper’ on Adult Education (Ir. Department of Education and Science 2000b, p.141) rather than making a specific contribution to the Access debate. Finally I will examine

perceptions of Access presented in the media, since the topic became a very newsworthy item in the latter part of the 1990's.

Chapter 7 presents the results of a survey of Irish Access provision which was carried out for this research, and Chapter 8 describes and analyses some Access outcomes through a case study of Access students in one institution, MIT. Finally, Chapter 9 provides a response to the major research questions, examines issues arising from the study and makes some recommendations for practice.

Chapter 2. Research Questions and Methodology

This chapter deals with the major research questions that inform this study, together with the methodology used to investigate these questions.

The primary research question asks what have been the main forces driving the emergence of Access policy and provision in Ireland in the 1990s, and what is the nature of this provision? The underlying problem giving rise to this question is the sudden and ad-hoc nature of Access development in Ireland, particularly over the last five years. The relevance of this problem to practice is the apparent shapelessness of the development, the lack of any regulating bodies for Access,¹ and until very recently, of dedicated Access posts or funding for Access support in the Irish further and higher education sectors (Lynch, 1999, p.12). This 'shapelessness' or lack of indication of clear driving forces in relation to Access has led, for practitioners like myself, to an uncertainty in relation to future Access planning or continuation. Moreover it is necessary to identify which voices have been the most powerful in Access discourse in order that lobbying or other political activity can be better focused. The issue has been raised as to whether the nature of Access provision in Ireland has evolved in line with its perceived effectiveness (Wagner, 2001, p.1), but it was decided that it is too early in its development to assess 'effectiveness' on a national basis.

As I stated in Chapter 1, Access provision for adults to enable them to progress to higher education in Ireland is still a very recent phenomenon. There was little discussion of Access provision before the 1990's and only one scheme for students with disabilities, pioneered in the 1980's by a disability body called the Association for Higher Education, Access and Disability (AHEAD), in University College, Dublin.

Conversely, British Access policy was developing in the 1970's and 1980's, and arose from initiatives pioneered by the large municipal polytechnics and some university extra-mural departments such as those at Magee College, Derry (D'Arcy, 1995, pp.51-69). It is understandable why there was no

¹ See Ch.6 for developments in 2001 in relation to Access structures.

similar interest in Access provision in Ireland at this period. Ireland was still exporting most of its graduates due to severe economic recession at home and there were at that time no Irish equivalents to the UK polytechnics which might have developed such provision.² Apart from the three universities in the State, there was only a group of developing and under-funded Regional Technical Colleges, and no awareness of Access for mature students as an issue to be tackled, as a scrutiny of the first 'Report of the Commission on Adult Education' shows (Kenny, 1983). Even worse, as the Director of the National Association of Adult Education in Ireland (AONTAS) stated angrily in relation to the government's Programme for Action in Education, 1984-7:

“Not alone is there no chapter on adult education; not alone is there no section on adult education; not alone is there not one recommendation in relation to adult education; but the words ‘adult education’ never occur once in the whole document” (O’Sullivan, 1993, p.337).

Another reason that Access for mature students to higher education was not the issue in the Ireland of the 1980's that it was in the UK, was that the number of adult students in Irish full-time higher education was very small – less than three per cent of the total. But this needs to be put into context of the time, since numbers in the Irish higher education system overall were also small (twenty-one thousand in 1965 to one hundred and twelve thousand in 1999- from one third in 1978 to two-thirds of the Leaving Certificate cohort in 1998) (Martin, 1999, p.6, and Clancy, 1999a, p.8) and confined to those who could pay the tuition fees. Up to the 1990's, entrants to higher education in Ireland were a self-selecting group of school-leavers, from mainly middle class backgrounds (Clancy, 1999a, p.9).

In relation to the primary research question asking about the driving forces behind the emergence of Irish Access policy, my hypothesis is that there is a

² This raises the question of why there should be separate Access provision for adults, rather than an institutional approach which is inclusive and welcoming to all types of student. This issue is considered in Ch.3.

growing but patchy public and institutional awareness of the nature of educational disadvantage in Ireland. This has been partly fuelled by our recent economic growth, leading to the recognition that there are educationally disadvantaged groups who cannot not share in this prosperity. For instance, OECD statistics show clearly that an individual's prospect of employment is strongly related to their current educational level (OECD, 1998, p.345). This new awareness of educational disadvantage has also been fuelled by the bad press given by international reports, such as the OECD's 'International Adult Literacy Survey: Results for Ireland' (Morgan et al., 1997), which places Ireland near the bottom of the league. There is also a growing demand for Access by adults, many of whom did not even have the opportunities to complete second-level education.³ I would also hypothesise that this awareness of educational disadvantage in Ireland has been fuelled by our membership of the EU, with its concern with social exclusion and for labour market participation. This has led to the development of a set of pilot initiatives targeted at the disadvantaged, including access to educational initiatives. It can be seen then that one set of forces has been external, arising from comparative studies of educational attainment on the one hand, and from a transnational concern for social exclusion and the devising of testable strategies to tackle this problem, as my own experience of working in this field demonstrates.

The secondary research questions enquire therefore about the sources of influence on Irish Access policy and the public perceptions of adult educational disadvantage as presented through the official documents and the media. These questions are tackled in specific detail in Chapter 6 of this study; the detailed critique of major policy events in Ireland such as the publication of the recent Irish 'Green' and 'White Paper on Adult Education' (Ir. Department of Education and Science, 1998 & 2000b) being central to this research. These policy events were critical activities, taking place at a historic place and time, when Ireland was on the point of embarking upon radical educational change in relation to adult students and Access and as a policy observer and activist, I was well placed to comment on these pivotal events.

³ There was no free second-level education in Ireland until 1967, considerably later than most OECD countries (O'Buachalla, 1988, p.284).

The need to develop and test an explanatory hypothesis for Access development leads in its turn to a consideration of the rationale and theoretical basis for Access provision. In Chapter 3 I propose to examine some different models of Access conceptualisation, stemming from those of widening participation and lifelong learning, equality and equity issues, to those of social, economic and labour market inclusion. These theoretical models originate from the domains of education and adult learning; moral and political philosophy, and social and economic theory.

It is also useful to explore how we align ourselves internationally in the move towards widening participation, through encouraging Access for adults to higher education. The push is on to increase the participation of adults⁴ in Irish higher education from its present low figure of five percent to fifteen per cent (Fitzgerald, 1999, p.5). However, there has been much recent discussion in Ireland of OECD statistics, showing that Ireland will still not have caught up with other countries in the numbers of adults completing upper secondary level education by the year 2015 (Thornhill, 1999, p.21). This provides a clear justification for Access policies and practices, both in terms of social justice/equity considerations for those deprived of earlier opportunities, and in terms of the skills shortages which will seriously endanger Irish economic growth unless we are able to provide continuous and sustained opportunities for lifelong learning.

An international comparative element is important here in determining which other countries have Access provision to higher education and why, and more particularly to enquire whether the experience of other countries has anything to teach us. Hence the importance of the detailed examination of Professor Skilbeck's report, commissioned by the Irish Higher Education Authority in 2000 (Skilbeck & Connell 2000a). For example, it is helpful to examine the survey of Access development in Britain and its categorisation of the different stages of Access development to show that there are parallels in Ireland at the present time to the stage of British Access development in the 1970's (Parry, 1996, pp.13-15). This was before the

⁴ Defined as those over 23 years of age.

British government began to be worried about Access provision, leading to the ‘discourses of derision’ (ibid., p.17) exemplified in the UK Lindop Report of 1985, and its recommendations for limiting guaranteed places in higher education for Access graduates (Lindop, 1985, p.70).

There are other implications too for national policy on Access – the national co-ordination necessary, when the issue of quality bodies will be tackled, the standardisation of policies on admission to higher education and the funding and sustainability of Access courses once short-term pilot provision has ended. The secondary research questions also relate to recent government policy and its effect on Access provision in Ireland. These questions are tackled in Chapter 6.

The remainder of the research moves from an investigation of policy, international and national, to an account of recent Access practice in Ireland through on the one hand, a national survey of Access courses, and on the other, through an analysis of the outcomes for one group of Access students in one institution. Finally the research will draw on findings from this examination of policy and practice to provide a concise overview of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the Access movement in Ireland at the present time.

In relation to the methodology used, I stated in Chapter 1 that the overarching methodology for this research topic is that of action research. A significant claim made for this methodological approach is that it offers a link between work carried out as part of one’s normal professional practice, and reflection on this, which when progressively focused becomes research. This in its turn becomes ‘praxis’ – reflective ‘wise and prudent action carried out in a concrete situation’ (Kemmis, 1993, p.182). According to Stenhouse (1975) this offers:

“the capacity for autonomous professional self-development; through systematic self-study, through the study of the work of other professionals, and through the testing of ideas by classroom research procedures.”
(p.144).

Thus the whole process constitutes a cycle of research and action; the latter informed and illuminated by the former.

My justification for this choice of action research is that as a practitioner and a researcher at the time the research was undertaken, I was involved both with the investigation of Access policy and provision at a local level, and with making a contribution to national policy and practice. This latter was achieved through submissions aimed at influencing government policy; academic and conference papers, and the provision of information to the Irish Department of Education and Science. In my capacity as manager of the 1996-98 AMSHE project and the subsequent educational guidance endeavour, I was required to show how 'lessons' derived from the projects could be used to influence policy. So in the years since 1996 not only have I have been responsible for a number of reports to relevant government departments and agencies, but have also acted in a consultancy capacity on Access to the Irish Department of Education and Science. My field role is therefore as researcher who is also a participant, rather than standing aloof from the subject, as in positivist social science research.

Three essential characteristics of action research are that: i) it is conducted by practitioners in the field; ii) the problems or questions to be investigated are those of practice, as selected by practitioners, and iii) much of the data collection and analysis is conducted by practitioners (Cleft et al., 1987). In terms of the applicability of these criteria to my own practice, the field *setting for the research is both local; within my own institution, national; within the country as a whole, and international; in terms of the wider influences explored.* The research question arises from a problem that began with practice; that of developing the first nationally accredited Access programme in Ireland, and the data collection was undertaken by myself as an Access practitioner.

A key aspect of action research then has been stated to be the reflective process whereby in a given problem area where one wishes to improve practice or personal understanding, inquiry is carried out by the practitioner, first to define the problem; secondly to specify a plan of action - including the testing of hypotheses (McKernan, 1996, p.5). It also implies that this

action may itself change and a progressive de-focusing, and re-focusing may take place. Evaluation is then undertaken to monitor and establish the effectiveness of the action taken. Finally participants reflect upon, explain developments and communicate these results to the community of action researchers. In relation to my own research this may be seen as follows:

- a contextualisation of the research problem, as shown in the discussion of the primary research question above;
- the specification of a plan of action (methodology) including a comparative analysis of international Access provision;
- a contents analysis of Irish policy documents, which together with the analysis above, comprises a review of the relevant literature;
- a survey of current Access provision;
- a case study comprising an analysis of the outcomes for one group of Access students, plus four vignettes of individual Access students;
- an evaluation of what has been found; suggestions for the way forward, and for future action and research in relation to Access as the outcome
- dissemination and publication, as a continuation of the action research cycle.

The de-focusing and re-focusing, spoken of above has also taken place; a change from the initial plan to conduct a detailed case study of Access in one institution, to looking at the national scene but incorporating the case study as one element of a larger whole. However, this case study will survey certain pre-determined categories relating to Access provision,⁵ rather than providing the more general 'thick description' sometimes referred to in case study research. (Gitlin et al., 1993, p.203). This 'thick description' will however still be utilised in the vignettes of four former Access students, two 'successful' in terms of outcomes, the others less so.

However, the research has acquired a clear defining shape - a narrowing down from the theoretical, general and international through the national and the local to the personal in the voices of individual students – a movement from macro to micro levels. One implication of this however is that as the focus has narrowed down to individual groups and students, then

⁵ See Appendix 4 for survey questions.

the investigation has become more detailed, hence the latter chapters of the study are considerably longer than the first chapters which deal with Access in more general terms.

The evaluation typical of action research methodology links clearly to the reflection and analysis on the effectiveness of Access provision that will be found in this research study. The dissemination of findings and communication of results to other action researchers is being carried out at two levels - by papers and reports on the subject presented to academic conferences and government bodies, and by the final dissertation. Work on EU pilot projects has shown me the importance of ongoing dissemination in order that research can influence policy.

With regard to 'praxis', the wise and informed action that Kemmis speaks of as completing the cycle of action research (op.cit., p.182), the reference to 'personal practice' in the preceding paragraphs of this chapter is an oversimplification. I do not now need to improve my own personal practice in relation to Access since it is unlikely that I will have any involvement in this area in the future. However, publication of this research,⁶ may be seen as a form of practice and indeed of 'praxis'. Moreover the field is too large to allow of any one individual action determining the shape or direction of the phenomenon. There is though, some action to be evaluated, such as the collection of data which will contribute to the national Access database on Access results, programmes and evaluation that is in the process of being created,⁷ together with the documentary collection and analysis of policy and public documents. For instance, the 1999 updating of the Access survey from the initial survey which took place in 1998 may also be seen to exemplify the cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting that is a feature of action research methodology (Lewin, 1947, p.17).

Winter makes the observation that if one of the characteristics of action research is that it denies the necessity for expert social scientists to carry out

⁶ Already commissioned by the Irish Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

⁷ This began at MIT with this research, but will hopefully be taken over by the National Coordinating body for Access, set up following the Macnamara Report of 2001.

the investigation of professional work, then there is a potential irony about any emphasis on methods. If the process is an inherent part of the professional ideal anyway, he queries whether specific methods are necessary (Winter, 1989). *Perhaps it could be said that the spiral of planning, doing, observing and reflecting is not specific to action research but is a feature of much writing on experiential learning that has characterised the last two decades, such as that of Kolb's 'virtuous cycle' (Kolb, 1984).*

More to the point, this research may be claimed to constitute the study of a 'bounded' system in which the unity of that system is retained as the focus, and in which a variety of data-gathering methods are used to identify and record the particular characteristics of that system, employing a conceptual framework to assist in the identification and explication of significant patterns and recurrences.

Unpacking the definition of the research given in the preceding paragraph, the 'bounded system' refers to a clearly defined situation and population – the emergent Access movement in Ireland, bearing in mind that there are broad implicit questions about this 'clearly defined population', such as how far to take Access, or to expand the population beyond its present limits. The investigation will use a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods to 'dig' into the phenomenon, but with no attempt to generalise beyond the boundaries of the system focused on. The 'conceptual framework' used to explicate 'patterns and recurrences' is drawn from the main theories underpinning Access discourse which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Some more general implications of the use of action research methodology lie in the ownership of the research. Kemmis (1993, p.186) claims that educational research is generally justified by reference to its contribution to educational reform, and that almost all educational research is policy research, which is, as I have already stated, central to my own study. On this view, research is a social enterprise and therefore a political activity. For Kemmis (ibid., p.188), action research may also be 'critical', shaped by the emancipatory intent to transform educational organisations and practices

in order to achieve social justice. It is therefore clearly pre-disposed towards ideology critique. In relation to this research, one of the aims in examining the conceptual basis for Access provision is to uncover some of the determining forces driving this movement, whether these be economic or in the interests of social justice - in other words, to expose the ideology behind the movement. I would therefore consider it the type of 'ideology critique' referred to by Kemmis (ibid.).

Participation in democratic processes requires a measure of control by people over their own lives and work, and it has been claimed that 'emancipatory action research' is one means of achieving such control (Habermas 1974). On this view, transformatory action undertaken by participants or those closely involved with the action, and the communication of this action to a wider group, with the aim of enlightenment, is a political and liberatory act, conducive to shaping democracy. Habermas makes large claims about political and ideological emancipation which seem removed from the more banal nature of my endeavour,⁸ but does indicate how the work of one researcher, and 'communicative action' (Habermas, 1984) may contribute to the historical processes of change.

The observation has already been made that there are no specific techniques which are characteristic of action research (Winter, 1989 and McKernan, 1996, p.33). It may include both quantitative and qualitative research approaches - the quantitative describing something as happening, as in the survey of the provision of Irish Access courses for adults in Chapter 7; the qualitative explaining why that something is happening, as in the contents analysis of Irish policy or newspaper features on educational disadvantage (Chapter 6); in the international comparative survey of Access provision (Chapter 5), or in the voices of individual Access students (Chapter 8).

The benefits of using both quantitative and qualitative approaches is that on

⁸ A number of education action researchers are unsympathetic to such forms of 'grand theorising' as those of Habermas, on the grounds that the language and concepts used are alien to educational practitioners (McKernan, 1996, pp. 259-60).

the one hand the collection and analysis of data can conform to the rigours and scrutiny of positivist scientific research (McKernan, *ibid.*), and on the other, the more fluid approaches of qualitative analysis can be use to tackle the issues of interpretation which are critical to this study. This combination of the two approaches also allows the use of triangulation (*ibid.*, p.185) in which an event is described and analysed from different perspectives, as in the *Access survey and outcomes for students (Chapters 7 & 8)*, in which Access provision is described from the views of both Access practitioners and participants.

To deal first with qualitative approaches. For the review of major policy documents for example, I have adopted the method espoused by Stephen Brookfield in his article on becoming a critical reader and reviewer of adult education literature (Brookfield, 1996, pp.57-79). This suggests an interrogation of the text and its contents in terms of a number of factors, including a focus on its ideological assumptions and perspectives, the dominant cultural values espoused, the selectivity of material, and even omissions from the text. I hope in this way I have avoided the dangers of being too descriptive and accepting of what has been written, though it is sometimes difficult to strike a balance between synopsising the contents of reports for people who have not read them, and providing an appropriate critique. This form of critical analysis is used in Chapter 6 in looking at public submissions following the publication of the 1998 Irish 'Green Paper on Adult Education' (Ir. Department of Education and Science, 1998), in order to identify major stakeholders and to gain some sense of public perceptions of Access. It is also used in Chapter 5 in the detailed analysis of the work of major advisors to the Irish government on Access, such as that of Professor Malcolm Skilbeck, whose report (*op. cit.*), will be very influential in driving future Irish government policy and practice.

In order to identify the stakeholders with an interest in Access provision in Chapter 6, I have adopted the typology suggested by Clark in his important text analysing the 'stakeholders' in relation to higher education (1983). He identifies three forces: the academic oligarchies, the state authority and the market. In my analysis, the 'market' is disadvantaged students themselves.

This categorisation is employed to provide an overall framework for the examination of Irish Access policy.

Another form of categorisation, 'contents analysis' is used in relation to the scrutiny of national newspapers over a set time period, in order to gain some public perceptions of the 'newsworthiness' of educational disadvantage. Here the analysis is conducted by a scrutiny and counting of key terms, headlines and content in order to gauge both authorial intention and the social context in which these articles were produced (O'Connell Davidson et. al., 1994, p.198). While this method makes no outright claims to objectivity, it does highlight significant terminology and concepts, and from these to gain some sense of the presentation of the Access discourse at a particular time, aimed at attracting public interest.

A different method employed is a series of structured interviews used to gain information from key informants such as those responsible for Access policy implementation, or from Access students. Such information, as detailed in Chapter 6 from a Department of Education official, is highly significant in the absence of other documentation on the origins of Access initiatives. This is also helpful in gaining perceptions about the origin of these Access initiatives, in order to correlate these with the inferences drawn from other sources, including those of the researcher. These interviews, about an hour long, are structured, with broad questions on the development of Access policy and practices, or on the experience of Access participants.

A distinct type of interpretative methodology is used by the researcher in the final chapter to reflect on the development of Access in Ireland. This is the technique known as SWOT Analysis, generally applied in the world of business, to identify critical factors in a situation (Cole, 1996, p.139). SWOT analysis allows a summing up of the forces, both external and internal being brought to bear in a particular situation, providing an overview of the strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities for action and the threats presented. It is chosen as a technique here for these reasons, especially its presentation of factors in concise form, showing the nature of the issues, and their importance as determinants of future strategy. It is thus an important tool in evaluative research, and in relation to future practice.

The choice of methodology used to collect data on Access provision and outcomes is quantitative overall. The Access survey was conducted through questionnaires distributed either by post or by personal contact, depending on the respondents' geographical situation. The reasons for this choice of method are straightforward. Questionnaires are a 'form of interview by proxy', easy to administer, providing direct responses to questions asked, and making the tabulation of responses effortless. Moreover it is a technique advocated by many action researchers (McKernan, 1996, p.125), and is useful when dealing with large numbers, or unknown respondents. The survey contributes to the primary and secondary research questions by investigating the outcomes of policy, whether that of Access course provision, or the outcomes of this provision for one group of Access students in one institution.

A second method, though partially qualitative in the reliance on interpretation, involves the use of focus groups comprised of Access students. These groups were facilitated by Access course staff given a number of open-ended questions to put to the group (see Appendix 5), then asked to provide a summary of the group discussions. The rationale for the use of focus groups is that they may be seen as a form of 'action inquiry', and thus falling clearly into an action research framework (McKernan, 1996, p.174). Within a group asked to focus on a problem or issue it is possible to identify common themes and feelings, and thus to ascertain group priorities in a way that individual questionnaires do not.

It is certainly the case then that this study uses a variety of techniques, from the conceptualisation and categorisation of theories of Access presented through reflection and through academic writing and papers, through to evaluative techniques on the outcomes and effectiveness of Access courses. Taken together the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods may be shown to produce an integrated account of the phenomenon, which would be lacking if only one of these methodologies was utilised. It is difficult to estimate the relative power of these different approaches, but it can be seen that findings drawn from the evidence of Access practitioners and students can be used to illuminate theoretical and comparative

approaches by bringing concepts such as 'social capital' or 'equity' to life.

Finally, the question of the reliability and validity of action research methodology needs to be addressed. In some quarters, action research methods are seen to be subjective, unreliable, and therefore invalid. It is certainly the case that action research methods cannot claim the type of external validity aimed for in positivist scientific research (Campbell & Stanley, 1963 p.175). In action research it is not possible to generalise beyond the boundaries of the system investigated, therefore the findings of action researchers cannot claim predictive value. Indeed, one of the claims made for the quantitative findings presented in Ch. 7 and 8 of this study is that the statistics are illuminative; throwing light on Access provision and outcomes, rather than being generalisable to unknown or to larger populations.

Moreover since the action researcher is part of the research and action studied, as opposed to standing aloof from it; with contextual analysis being a key element of action research, then the findings of the research cannot be replicable, since no one else can possess the unique perspective of the researcher.

The rigour of action research therefore does not derive from the use of particular techniques, such as the quantitative techniques utilised in part of this report, but from the coherence of interpretations in the reflective phase of the research, together with the coherence and justification of the actions proposed. One method by which this coherence may be achieved is through the use of triangulation to arrive at similar observations/conclusions obtained from multiple perspectives on the subject (Elliott, 1977, p.10). McKernan (op. cit. p.188), claims that the more rigorous the triangulation, the more reliable the observations and results.

Kemmis (1993, p.185) suggests another way by which validity may be achieved for action research, through the conceptualisation of Habermas, referred to earlier in this chapter. Kemmis cites the latter's three criteria for 'critical social science'. First, Habermas claims that action researchers are engaged in the formation of critical theories about their own situation and

practice, but this can only take place under the pre-condition of 'freedom of discourse' (ibid.). One criterion relating to this communicative action is that the truth of statements is evaluated through the recognition that what is stated is accurate or appropriate. Next, at the level of 'enlightenment', researchers are involved in applying and testing their practical theories *through their own actions and situations*. Here the criterion is 'authentic insights' (ibid), grounded in the researcher's own circumstances and experiences. Finally at the level of organisation of action, action researchers are engaged in the selection of strategies and resolution of practical questions. Here the criterion is 'praxis' or prudent decisions (ibid.).

Evaluating the validity of action research therefore requires analysis at each level. Put more simply, one can ask of the cycle of reflection, theory and action that constitutes action research, is it true; does it make sense in terms of experience; and is the action prudent? In terms of this research one might ask whether the definitions and theories propounded, together with the comparative analysis, are accurately stated and discussed. Does the analysis of policy and quantitative analyses of Access providers and students make sense in the light of comparable experiences? Is the final cycle of action identified through the Swot analysis and publication, the most prudent way to consider a further cycle of action and research, given the situational and contextual analysis provided?

According to Schofield (1993, p.109) a 'consensus' appears to be emerging in relation to the generalisability of qualitative research, which is that the key question is a matter of the 'fit' between the situation studied and others to which one might apply the concepts and conclusions of the study. For that 'fit' to be considered adequate it is necessary to provide the type of in-depth research or 'thick description' (ibid. p.97) that has been utilised in this study. Thus, in terms of Access, this research aims to identify its conceptual bases and ideological stance; examine the development of Access in Ireland by means of a comparative investigation; provide quantitative data about existing Access courses and examine the effectiveness of Access. Within this there are a number of recommendations about quality bodies, about the importance of support mechanisms and about the tracking of students.

The next chapter moves from an investigation of the research questions and methodologies to defining and elucidating the key term of this study, 'Access'.

Chapter 3. Key Definitions of Access

This chapter aims to define, elucidate and investigate the rationale for the term 'Access' which is the focus of the primary and secondary research questions of this study. It begins by defining the term and pointing out some key features of Access courses, before discussing a rationale for Access policies and initiatives, and examining some of the concepts relating to educational disadvantage and non-participation which inform discourses of Access.

An aspect of the research, beginning in this chapter, and continued through the following three chapters, will be to examine the discourses and rhetoric enshrined in Irish and EU government policy, and its dissemination, in order to identify which groups are being targeted for Access initiatives, and for what purposes.

To begin with definitions, it has been claimed that,

“A feature of the Access debate of the last few years has been a diversity of interpretation of the term itself”
(Harrison, 1993, p.3).

Harrison points to the fact that at the one end of the spectrum, 'Access' is understood as the provision of courses 'designed to enable entry into higher education for non-traditional students' (Further Education Unit, 1987). At the other it includes all those education and training opportunities provided by the public, voluntary and private sector, including employers, with the aim of meeting either general or vocational needs. It is the former meaning with which this research is concerned.

Access to higher education courses have been defined as those which:

- facilitate entry to higher education;
- provide mainly for mature students;
- cater for individuals without conventional entry requirements who do not feel ready to enter directly;
- meet the needs of specific groups under-represented in higher education;

- provide an alternative to courses offered by other educational, vocational or professional examining bodies.

(Davies & Parry, 1993, p.4).

Three key features of such courses according to Hayes et al. (1997, p.20) are that:

- they are targeted at under-represented groups;
- they are developed and delivered by a process of collaboration between further education and higher education sectors (this may be particular to the UK experience of Access);
- they offer clear progressions and programmes of study in higher education.

In relation to Hayes's first point, there are a number of there are criticisms that can be made of targeted provision, as well as justifications that can be offered for it.

One criticism of such courses is that rather than expecting adult students to meet the equivalent of an Access standard set for younger students, (the Leaving Certificate), higher education institutions should instead offer mainstream programmes which can accommodate students of whatever backgrounds and attributes, and develop them to degree standard. This is the concept of 'inclusivity' which demands intensive and institution-wide levels of learning support appropriate to individual interests and needs. Thus the challenge is for the institution rather than the student. If institutions simply offer formal Access courses they ignore other, and perhaps more appropriate means to serve the Access needs of the community or population.

However, the targeted approach offered by Access courses means that resources, including teaching and curriculum strategies can be concentrated on the identified needs of under-represented groups. Moreover, such courses can provide a supportive environment in which individuals at similar levels of academic achievement may study with their peers towards clearly defined goals. This latter concept of peer and group support is also in line with modern theories of social and collaborative learning (Greeno et al, 1996).

Clancy (1995b, p.112) points out that within the Irish context there are two types of Access course – one for school –leavers whose background has disadvantaged them in competing for places in higher education, and therefore need some compensatory action, and one for older entrants who might have been similarly disadvantaged, and who are being offered a second-chance or new opportunity to study. The interest of this research is with the latter group only.

The Dublin ‘Seminar on Access to Higher Education Proceedings’ (HEA, 1995a, p.4) identifies three different types of Access course:

- single-exit direct entry Access courses which are designed to focus directly on one higher education courses in one institution, often offering direct entry to that programme so that a certain number of places on the higher education programme are reserved for Access candidates, as in the University of Dundee ‘New Opportunities’ Course (Spackman, 1995, p.79);
- multi-exit Access courses. Such courses focus directly on more than one higher education course in more than one institution, offering guaranteed entry to their programme for successful students as in the former Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) (ibid., p.78);
- open-exit Access courses, aimed at improving eligibility for higher education programmes. Students are not guaranteed entry, but on completion of Access courses they are better equipped to compete for higher education places. MIT Access courses are examples of these (Jordan, 1997a, pp.188-194).

The structure of such courses as those above may be different but O’Fathaigh (1995, p.19) has outlined three key components of such courses, though there may be considerable variability in the mix of these components. They must:

- impart knowledge in certain designated subject areas;
- offer the skills that students need to succeed in higher education e.g. study skills techniques;

- offer scope for personal development (p.6).

The content of such Access courses may include a broad mix of subjects or 'taster' courses providing a broad intellectual base, or may be specific to a particular discipline. For example, Access courses in Science and Technology may include subjects such as mathematics, physical and quantitative sciences and biology or life sciences. Courses in Humanities may include a very broad mix of subjects ranging from history, philosophy, literature, to sociology or psychology. The UK Open University whose Level 1 Arts module may be regarded as a type of Access course, offers a broad base in all the subject areas of the Humanities and Level 1 credits, without any entry requirements, and on a first - come, first-served basis.

One concern about Access voiced by policymakers in the UK (Lindop, 1985, p.71), and also by the popular press is the view that in Access courses offered to non-traditional entrants there could be a lowering of quality and of standards. Advocates of this view cite the fact that there are generally no pre-requisite academic entry requirements for Access courses, and students demonstrate a variety of intellectual levels, as is to be expected from disadvantaged adults or those without conventional entry qualifications.¹ However, given the evolution of Access this latter point indicates precisely the challenge facing educational institutions, and evaluation of the phenomenon needs to focus on outcomes of such courses rather than the inputs.

The specific group of students identified in this research is that of adults, and again a definition of 'adult' is needed, since the concept of an adult in relation to education differs from country to country. For example, in the UK educational system an adult is defined as a person of twenty one or over at the time of entry to third- level education; in Ireland it is currently twenty three, and in some other countries it may be as high as twenty nine or thirty at the time of entry (Davies, 1995, p.287).

¹ The issue of quality in Irish Access courses is the subject of a chapter entitled 'Smartening Up' or 'Dumbing Down': Standards in Access Courses.' (Jordan, 2000, pp. 51-62).

Dorney & Arrowsmith (1997, p.73) in their investigation of why adults participate in education have identified what they called 'Five Dimensions of Participation in Adult Education', and the social groups to whom these dimensions apply. The first dimension is entitled 'Compensation theory' – that adult education offers an opportunity for social integration following a period of social exclusion or personal difficulties. The second dimension is 'Internal mobility' and refers to vocational training carried out in the workplace, in specific skill areas. The third dimension is 'Retraining' with vocational adult education as a means of securing new sets of workplace skills. The next dimension is 'Social mobility' and this refers to unqualified or indeed qualified workers seeking academic training programmes as a means of securing employment with higher social prestige and payment. The final dimension is 'Upgrading' with adult education offering improved professional skills to groups such as managers or teachers.

If we apply these concepts to the adults who may be involved in Access provision it is clear that what is offered is a primarily a form of compensation to individuals for early inequalities, But it is also what Davies, following Weiler, has called 'compensatory legitimation' (Davies, 1995, p.120) on the part of the state, in which this body responds to challenge or conflict by groups anxious for change, by providing some form of legislative 'compensation', in this case in enabling Access provision to cater for the demand for higher education from non-traditional groups. For example, the strong economic payoffs associated with Access have been noted in many countries (Wagner, 2002, p.2). Increasingly Access has become for individuals and groups a means of social mobility; of acquiring workplace skills, and of upgrading employment possibilities through the provision of educational programmes leading to qualifications and hence to the labour market.

More straightforwardly, Davies (1995, p.287) categorises adult learners into three types: 'deferrers' who are similar to the traditional student except that they have taken extra time to obtain the entry qualification to higher education; 'second chance' students – those who did not obtain the necessary entry qualifications from secondary schooling, often because they were economically or socially disadvantaged; third, 'returners' - those who

have re-entered the system to upgrade the level of their qualifications, such as those in particular professions like nursing. These categorisations are important since it can be seen that educational objectives will be different for the three groups. For instance, the group most likely to seek and benefit from Access provision are 'second chance' students, who in terms of their characteristics can be seen to fit into the 'Compensation theory' dimension discussed in the paragraph above.

To turn to the justification for Access provision, McGivney provides three major rationales for Access policies and provision:

- equity and social justice;
- pragmatism and expediency;
- economic national interest (cited in Osborne et al., 1996, p.419).

One would expect that a concern for 'second-chancers', the subjects of this research, would be fundamentally couched in a discourse of equity and social justice. Skilbeck (Skilbeck & Connell, 2000b, p.4) for example, utilises the moral philosopher Rawls's 'difference principle' (Rawls, 1999, pp. 65-66) to show that inequality in access to 'primary goods' by certain groups is acceptable only when it can be conclusively shown that ultimately this inequality in access gives rise to greater benefits for everyone. For Rawls, 'opportunity' including educational opportunity, is a 'primary good'. Denial of, or a lack of commitment to educational opportunities for specific groups on the part of the state must therefore be seen to contribute to the benefit of society as a whole, but it is difficult to envisage the circumstances in which that could be the case, unless in times of grave national emergency. Conversely, the state has an obligation, in the interests of fairness, to allocate resources in education so as to improve the 'long-term expectation of the least favoured' (ibid.p.87), not simply for economic or social welfare reasons, but in order that individuals can gain a secure sense of their own worth, and participate in society. Above all, education is necessary in order that all members of society can attempt to achieve their ultimate aims through framing a 'rational plan of life' (Rawls, 1999, p.360).

The importance of Rawls's theory lies in explicating the principles upon which the social justice and equality arguments, often used to justify Access

policies, are made. The theory is also important however in encompassing specific Access rationales such as 'economic national interest' or those of welfare within a broader philosophical framework of justice and the nature of the Good.

An interest in 'returners', the third group mentioned is clearly linked to economic and labour market considerations. In fact it can be seen that Access initiatives are generally targeted at the second and third groups, though in practice might attract participants from the first – 'deferrers', especially as there is an emerging trend to defer the age of entry to higher education (Parry, 1997, p.12).

With reference to the scope and definition of 'higher education', Davies' 1995 comparative analysis of higher education shows that some countries operate a binary system of higher education, with universities and polytechnic-type institutes or fachhochschulen (p.280). Ireland has a binary system, composed of universities and institutes of technology, whilst other countries such as the UK and Australia have merged universities and some higher education institutes to form unitary systems of equal university status (Parry, 1995, p.106 & Postle, 1995, p.8). Others are just developing binary systems from what were previously unitary ones, such as Austria, with its development of a fachhochschulen -polytechnic sector. These different types of system all have implications for the provision of Access,² but a noticeable trend in OECD countries is a blurring of the distinctions between universities and other higher education establishments, so that binary or unitary distinctions are becoming less significant. One implication for the terminology of this report is the use of the more inclusive phrase 'higher education' (HE) rather than 'university education', though it is claimed that the phrase 'tertiary' or 'third-level education' as it is designated in Ireland, would be more inclusive still (Wagner, 2002, p.2).

As I claimed above, the objectives of Access will differ according to the adult group targeted, and the system in which it is provided. However, the

² The most recent list of Access courses in the UK notes 20 different vocational Access pathways, for example, in health and social care, teaching, business and information technology (DfEE 2001).

underlying objective of Access courses is as given in the Irish HEA Seminar on Access held in Dublin in 1995:

"To form a bridge, or to help fill a gap, for those who are disadvantaged in some form or another, by comparison with their peers in accessing higher education" (Lindsay, 1995, p.i).

The key point made in the statement above is that Access courses are seen to be a form of compensatory mechanism in relation to disadvantage. This clearly signals Access as an equity issue, though an analysis of other statements on Access reveals a more instrumental motivation, as shown in public discussions of government policy on Access, couched in economic terms (O' Hare, 1999). As Wagner claims, (2002, p. 2) Access can serve both equity and instrumental aims; a 'complementarity of interests'.

The concept of 'disadvantage' utilised throughout this study is an educational one. According to Kellaghan et al. (1995, p.2) although the concept of educational disadvantage has been widely used, there have been few attempts to define it. For the purposes of this account I will take it to represent a complex phenomenon which results from the interaction of deep-seated economic, social and educational factors. Richards calls this a 'cumulative' disadvantage, incorporating not only the above, but cultural and dispositional factors, leading to certain groups perceiving that education is 'not for the likes of us' (1997). Thompson writing back in 1980, claims that the term has been used as a form of shorthand, linking precariously-related tendencies into a common stereotype. But she also points out that the notion of 'educational disadvantage' has many strengths when applied to particular groups since it can appeal to a number of conflicting ideologies (Thompson, 1980, p.89). It should be noted that the discussion here emphasises group rather than individual differences, as this study emphasises a group-oriented approach, through Access provision. It was pointed out earlier in this chapter (page 21) that there are alternative ways of dealing with disadvantage through the application by institutions of a concept of 'inclusivity', entailing adjustment and flexibility on their part.

The philosopher Rawls whose 'difference principle' was cited above, claims that educational resources should not be allotted solely on the returns that will be made to society through their investment, but according to their worth in enriching the personal, 'rational' and social life of citizens (Rawls, 1999, p.92). As other commentators have also pointed out, participation in third-level education is increasingly perceived in western societies as 'an absolute good' (Quigley & Arrowsmith, 1997, p.115), the key to labour market success, and promoted by governments as a strategy for meeting a range of social and economic policy objectives. However, many groups and communities are not able to participate in any form of adult education, much less higher education. Hasan and Tuijnman (1997, p.230) estimate in their comparative study of six OECD countries that only ten per cent of disadvantaged adults participate in adult education. Participation in, and access to higher education are dependent on one's socio-economic position, which means that the highest socio-economic groups continue to dominate the higher education scene and to prosper as a result of this involvement (Woodley, 1987, p. 85).

In relation to the ability of certain groups to participate, Lynch (1998) talks of 'drowning in a sea of liberalism' which leads to equalising Access or entry to higher education for individuals, but leaving wider social and political structures intact. She points out that educational inequality is clearly linked to economic and political mobility. Liberalism, which emphasises opportunities for individuals on the basis of their self-motivation therefore offers upward mobility only for a tiny minority of individuals, rather than for those disadvantaged groups in society. According to Preece (1999) therefore, the outcomes of equality policies remains the same - only exceptional or fortunate individuals will gain access to third level education, gain the qualifications, secure full time employment and become part of the socially included (p.65).

Lynch's comment is reinforced by the observation of the British adult educator, Peter Jarvis. He points out, with regard to the UK experience of Access, that the government's intervention in society may be seen as providing opportunities for underprivileged groups, but is individualistic in orientation, and will cease should the individual or social situation change.

(Jarvis, 1993, p.32). In order to explicate this he suggests there are two models of Access - the first a 'Welfare' model in which Access opportunities will be provided until such time as the groups needing such opportunities have declined (ibid, p.44). The second is an 'Institutional' model which recognises that since the state will never be able to provide a just allocation of resources in society, there will always be a need for such provision, and Access will be institutionalised. He suggests that this latter model provides a relevant contemporary framework for analysing the provision of educational opportunities for adults (ibid).

Up to this point the terms 'equity' and 'equality' have been used interchangeably, which, as Lynch (1994, pp.29-30) points out has frequently been the case in Access discourses. She points out the connotations of both terms - 'equity' having primarily an economic meaning - that of 'fairness in distribution'; the sense in which it is used by Rawls, followed by Skilbeck. 'Equality' she claims has a weak 'liberal' meaning, implying 'equality of opportunity' for individuals, and a stronger more radical sense of 'equality of condition', which would ultimately entail an equal distribution of wealth. In order to distinguish between these weaker and stronger meanings of equality, the term 'equity' or 'equality of outcome' will be used where necessary.

Skilbeck comments that in modern political analysis 'equity' is often subsumed under 'democratisation' - all have a voice through participative processes and this should not be pre-empted by one group on behalf of another, but should be shared, giving rise to individual freedom and a community of interests and values (Skilbeck & Connell, 2000a, pp.14-15). For Skilbeck therefore his two key terms are 'equity' and 'access', whilst indicating that Access is not only a matter of equity but of economic, socio-cultural, and 'human capital' concerns (ibid., p.15).

Those currently experiencing poverty and social exclusion are unlikely to benefit from existing higher education systems, for reasons categorised by Cross (1981) as situational, institutional or dispositional. 'Situational' reasons encompass an individual's 'life situation' and may include lack of finances or childcare. 'Institutional' includes the administrative procedures

which define courses of study, or even the non-availability of courses required by individuals (Harrison, 1993, p.11), and may also refer to the perceived inflexibility of institutions to adapt to the needs of specific groups. 'Dispositional', perhaps the most complex, covers issues of motivation or incentives to participate. It relates to attitudes and perceptions, including that of learning being too difficult, threatening or irrelevant.

Harrison (ibid.) suggests that research has found that it is the dispositional factors which are the most underestimated, but form the most powerful deterrents to participation in adult education. This is borne out by the work of some Irish researchers such as Ronayne (1999b) in his account of the reasons given by unemployed men in one Irish town, for not wishing to participate in education or training.

There are some important sociological concepts which elucidate this idea of non-participation, taking Cross's categorisation a stage further. Hedoux studying unemployed French miners in the late 1970's found that social factors are also an important factor in adult participation in education. Those unemployed adults most likely to participate in training were those who were self-selecting, more socially active, and belonged to social networks where information could be exchanged and experience evaluated (1982). "Access attracts active citizens" (Benn, 1996, p.170). Those least likely to participate were the most socially isolated. There are clear messages here in relation to social exclusion and strategies using education to promote such inclusion.

Around the same period, the French sociologist, Bourdieu, (du Gay et al., 1997, p.97) in his study of French museum-goers developed the concept of 'Cultural capital' to describe the tendency of some groups to invest and build on their cultural inheritance, whilst other groups perceive that 'elitist' cultural activity, such as museum attendance, is not for the likes of them.

Schuller (1998) has taken these ideas further by developing the concept of 'Social capital', which is most directly relevant to Access discourses. 'Social capital' is here defined as the set of shared values, social communication

networks and supportive environments in society.³ The claim made is that *closer understanding of the ways that education and training can contribute to social capital, for example, parents' planned investment for children, will help us to understand the broader social environments that foster lifelong learning.*

Finally the work of another sociologist, Foucault (Faubion 2000), can be used to conceptualise non-participation in terms of power relationships and dominant societal values. His theories explain why some dominant kinds of knowledge, such as academic knowledge, authority and rituals are prized, whilst other forms of knowing (informal, folk, or working class knowledge for example, is discarded. One effect of this, according to Preece (1999), is to place the blame for non-participation on the learner rather than the institutions. Moreover, individuals themselves may internalise these dominant values and see their own knowledge, abilities or ways of learning as worthless. There are clear implications here for the content and structuring of Access provision.

In attempting to evaluate the ideas which have some place in Access discourse, the claim may be considered that:

“the current conversation concerning Access is too new, too narrow and too shallow” (Parry, 1997, p.10).

With regard to the charge of the ‘newness’ of Access discourse, then this same charge could also be directed at the much broader field of adult education discourse (Jarvis 1987, pp. 3-12). Adult education is itself a comparatively new discipline, drawing on philosophy, social psychology, sociology, and critical theory, apart from theories of education, and these are the same fields from which Access concepts arise. As to ‘narrow’ and shallowness’ there have been studies of Access which do not appear to contribute much to the Access debate, neither in terms of broad theoretical understanding, nor of illuminations of practice. Educational research itself, of which this forms a part, could be equally criticised. Perhaps the patina of

³ Wagner claims that although there is a widening literature on social capital, there is also *imprecision in the way that the concept is used within the literature.* (Wagner, 2002, p.3).

time is needed to fully legitimise these new interdisciplinary areas, and to crystallise the key concepts around which the Access discourse will cohere.

The key concepts I have identified in this study are those drawn from philosophical theories concerned with social justice, particularly those of the philosopher Rawls, leading to the 'equity' and 'equality' principles discussed by educationalists such as Skilbeck (op. cit.) and Lynch (op. cit.). These equity principles link directly with the concept of 'compensation' and to the obligation for the state, through its policies, to legitimise and institutionalise Access. The work of Lynch is important in making key distinctions between principles of 'equity' and 'equality' and the consequences following from their adoption, including the possible contradictions arising from a weak 'individualistic' liberal model of 'equality' as opposed to a strong social distributive model of 'equity'.

The research of 'participation theorists' such as McGivney (op. cit.) is important in highlighting the economic and instrumental reasons for Access policies and practices. Finally, the work of some modern sociologists has been used to explain why different social groups are keen to participate in social and cultural activity such as education, and may feel comfortable with the ways of knowing that are presented, whilst others are not.

This chapter has dealt with the definitions and key features of Access including the structure of Access courses. It has examined the rationales for such provision, together with an explanation and conceptualisation of some associated terms, such as 'disadvantage' and 'non-participation'. The following chapter will examine some of the global trends leading to Access provision.

Chapter 4. Global Trends and EU Policy Leading to Access Provision

In order to understand the context of current Access provision in Ireland and elsewhere, it is necessary to examine some global educational trends over the last half century. A list of general characteristics may be found in Skilbeck's article 'A Changing Educational and Social Context' (1989), which is an analysis of educational trends in a number of OECD countries since the 1950s to the end of the 1980s. Skilbeck points out that a major feature of education in the latter part of the twentieth century is that it is increasingly under the control of government (only in 1999 was the Irish state buying secondary school lands and properties from the religious orders which up to the present time has provided most national secondary education).

Increasingly, investment in education is seen as critical to the economic well-being of society (ibid., p.24), and it is no coincidence that many policy documents from the 1960's onwards have used this term as a rationale in education policy documents, for example, 'Investment in Education' (Ir. Department of Education, 1966). Along with this was a movement, also beginning in the 1960s, to improve access to education. This was apparent initially in second -level education with some elimination of strict selective systems, but soon spread to third level education, as shown by the increase in university numbers in many countries from the 1960s onwards, leading paradoxically, in some countries to greater control of participation in the form of 'numerus clausus' or restrictions on entry. In part this improvement in participation arose from concerns with equality and social justice, and partly from an increased demand, linked with a growth in credentialism and the necessity for qualifications, as a means of entry to the labour market. This in its turn has led to a public interest in the content and quality of education, and in general to greater accountability (Skilbeck, ibid., p.24). Since these have been concerns that run across national borders there has been increasingly a search for common ground, and an interest in 'best practice' in relation to educational initiatives. This is evidenced by the number of publications of comparative surveys of education, aided by the OECD reviews of national policies, such as the 'Education at a Glance'

series (OECD) and more recently by the European Union's¹ involvement in education and training.

Skilbeck points out a tension that is of great interest to this study of Access - that economic interests in education are not always compatible with personal development models and concepts of lifelong learning (ibid., p.26). He stresses the importance of linking the content of education with everyday life, an increasing student-centredness in relation to teaching methods (variable depending on the country and tradition surveyed), and the necessity to keep up to date with changing technologies and labour market demands (ibid., p.27).

Turning more specifically to the education of adults, Spear & Mocker (1989), commentators on the US experience more than a decade ago, pointed out four significant trends they thought likely to have a serious impact on adult education provision:

- 1) the ageing of the US population with a shift from youth to mature orientation;
- 2) the increasing influence of the new technologies;
- 3) re-definitions of work and productivity;
- 4) the struggle for power by specific groups and a growth in dissensus as these groups compete for resources (p.647).

Some implications of these trends, which have an applicability beyond the US can now be seen. The ageing of the US population has led to an increased demand by adults, and more recently by older adults² for *educational opportunities, partly as a realisation of the concepts of lifelong learning, and partly as a compensatory mechanism for opportunities not available at earlier stages in their lives.* Policy-makers therefore need to look beyond labour market demands. The growing influence of the new technologies and the changing nature of work, with societies moving from industrial to knowledge-based economies have resonances for policy and practice in every country. The final point is perhaps the most interesting –

¹ I shall follow Field (1998 p.vi) in using the term EU rather than earlier terms like EEC other than in direct quotes or references where an earlier expression was used.

² The next target group perhaps for Access initiatives.

that a clamour for access to education and training will arise from particular groups, often with competing interests, and opportunities for one group may disadvantage another. Hence the obligation for the state to provide forms of 'compensatory legitimation' mentioned in the last chapter. One example of competing demands arose from our REGSA education guidance project for socially excluded adults (Harte & Jordan, 1999, pp.43-45). If we limited access to our guidance service to those who were clearly disadvantaged, for example, unemployed adults from communities or from families with no experience of upper secondary education, we fulfilled our funding requirements but excluded other adults for whom no guidance service of any kind is yet available. These may be older adults in work or in retirement, such as members of the group referred to by Spear & Mocker (op. cit., p. 647) above, or those who received an upper secondary education, but one which was inadequate to enable them to progress up the ladder of educational opportunity.³

Moving next to higher education and the growth in the number of adults within higher education systems, Davies (1995, op cit.) identifies the following trends in relation to Access and participation in OECD countries. These include an increase over the last thirty years in the diversity of higher education provision with a growth in the number of non-university or technological institutes of education in several countries (Davies, 1995, p.1), for example, the *hochschulen* or *fachhochschulen* in Germany and Austria, and the institutes of technology in Ireland (Davies, 1995, p.1). This non-university sector has been very important in the promotion of Access for non-traditional learners, and adults (though this comment should be qualified in the case of the Irish institute of technology sector, which has not admitted a greater proportion of adult students to their full-time courses than the universities).

Most significant perhaps is what has been called the 'massification' of education – the transition from elite to mass systems of higher education

³ Other indications are that there could be gains for all parties in the changing provision of education for adults. Wagner (2002, p.1) states that demand-driven responses to diversity by institutions, leads to inclusiveness, as opposed to targeting and competitiveness.

(Ball, 1999). Mallinson, as long ago as 1980, saw that the primary role of higher education has now changed from the pursuit of scholarship to dealing with the technological changes required in advanced industrial societies (Mallinson, 1980, p.300). This is conceptualised by Duke (1997, pp.62-63) in terms of two different discourses – the elite model (UK) with its discourse of ‘selection’, ‘scholarship’ and ‘collegiality’ and the Service Model (US) with its discourse of ‘Access’, ‘lifelong learning’ flexible entry and ‘experiential learning’. However it has also been recognised that the historic traditions of the European universities has sometimes made it difficult for them to come to terms with mass participation (Ir. Department of Education and Science, 1998, p.99), so there have only been partial shifts in philosophy, with the old discourses existing alongside the new.⁴ However, the adaptation to mass systems has had an impact on the types of student targeted, leading to changes in admission procedures and patterns of participation, alternative entry routes, new arrangements for adults entering higher education and the policies, resources and funding of higher education. The targeting of particular social groups, highlighted in Chapter 3 of this research is of much interest to the Access debate in terms of the extent to which institutions adopt a proactive and collectivist approach to key groups or rely on an older form of self-selected individualist provision (Benn, 1996, p.165).

Over the last forty years there has also been an increase in the demand for the ‘public recognition of learning’ (Jarvis, 2001 p.185-194), or the certification of training, in areas where it was previously uncalled for. This is linked to the emergent and rising ‘professionalisation’ of certain occupations such as nursing, engineering, teaching, social work to name a few, leading to an increased demand for higher education provision. In some countries such as France and Germany this vocational demand has been particularly linked to Access provision, alternative entry routes for adults and an attempt to equalise vocational and academic systems. For example, in France professionalism is taking place within the universities as new professional programmes are established within traditional academic

⁴ An alternative view is that mass education could take place outside of conventional higher education institutions, perhaps through the workplace or the community (Wagner, 2002. p. 3).

disciplines such as languages. In Germany, learners are combining studies in vocational subjects provided by the *fachhochschulen* with those academic subjects and programmes of the universities (Wagner, 2002, p.2).

The change of elite university systems to mass systems of higher education has also led to a shortening of academic courses (most apparent in some European countries where undergraduate courses might take up to seven years to complete) to a provision of programmes of different lengths with different exit points, providing differential ladders of progression to sought qualifications. Along with this has gone a movement to devise frameworks of qualifications, the accreditation of prior learning, and an attempt to determine equivalences between vocational and academic qualifications in order to provide both horizontal and vertical integration.⁵ The breaking down of courses into semesters and modules, often with the accreditation and accumulation of single subjects is an example of another trend to produce more digestible learning experiences for students and to introduce greater flexibility.

Ironically, the UK which until recently had one of the most elitist entry systems in Europe for admission to higher education through the 'gold standard' of A' level (Jarvis, 2001 p. 34), now has an extensive use of Access programmes, and flexible modular systems. However this may be explained by the fact that 'Access' per se is not an issue in many European countries where all those who are qualified are entitled to a university place, as in Italy. The flexible approaches may be due in part to a higher education system formed from an integration of newer universities (ex polytechnics) which have made many accommodations in favour of part-time provision and credit systems, with the older universities which have also had to make some concessions to market-driven or student-friendly approaches.

These changes have also led, in the world of higher education, to a reconsideration of what constitutes an adult or mature student. On the one hand there has been a movement to lower the age of what constitutes an adult - to eighteen in some countries, such as the Netherlands (Davies, 1995,

⁵ Note the Bologna Declaration (1999) as a European attempt to standardise undergraduate programme lengths and awards (Thornhill, 2000, p.1).

p.210), to twenty one in others, but alongside this is a trend whereby students themselves are deferring entry to higher education beyond the traditional age of eighteen or nineteen years, often for economic reasons. In the UK, thirty four per cent of the student body now entering higher education are over the age of twenty one, with ninety four per cent of part-time undergraduates over twenty one (DfEE, 2001). This coupled with a demographic downturn leading to fewer young students has serious implications for higher education, and may explain in some contexts a development of Access provision for adults, as Postle (1995) described happened in Australia at the end of the 1970's.

A further implication of the drive to mass participation is how this expansion is to be funded. Tight (1996b, p.119) points out that the UK in seeking to enrol over a third of all eighteen year olds, and an even larger number of mature students in higher education, has had to encourage part-time provision, larger class sizes and mixed modes of delivery, and this trend is likely to continue. A further implication is in the location of higher education provision. Part-time provision, and the move to attract larger numbers of mature and Access students can only be successful if provision is in fact accessible, not only in terms of entry but in location. Moreover, there is, in some countries, and especially the UK, an increasing reliance on delivery of higher education courses through further education, and alliances between the two sectors to ensure more comprehensive provision. One clear indicator of the fact that expansion in Ireland will not entail the building of new universities is demonstrated by government limitations on new university development, as shown by the reluctance to upgrade the institutes of technology to university status. Higher educational institutions are being required to be more responsive to their local and regional needs, including that for greater numbers of technicians, and people with national certificates and diplomas in applied subject areas (WIT, 1998, 4.16).

To summarise, this short section has attempted to cover great tracts of ground in tracing some global trends that have led to increasing Access provision. These can be divided into three parts. First are the general trends of educational change, concisely reviewed by Skilbeck (op. cit.), including increased governmental control; investment in education as critical for

societal well-being; an opening up of educational systems, together with a search for common ground. Arising from these are unresolved tensions between economic and personal development educational objectives.

Next are trends in adult education, including a competitive demand for education by adults driven by concepts of lifelong learning, the demands of the new technologies and the need for workforce re-skilling. Along with this has gone the targeting of different types of student groups; linkages between higher education and industry, and a move to shorten academic courses and to make them more flexible. Finally, and most importantly for this study, institutional practices in higher education have been highlighted, including diversity in higher education provision, with a growth of alliances between different sector providers in order to meet the demands associated with the 'massification' of higher education.

Turning now towards the European impetus to Access, an article examining conceptions of educational disadvantage and associated rationales for action (Ronayne, 1999c, p.2) has pinpointed three of the major policy paradigms identified from a reading of key policy documents at European and international levels. This section of the report will lay out these paradigms before providing a chronological account of some European and OECD policy literature which will also attempt to situate such policy in relation to the paradigms mentioned, as well as in relation to Access. It is useful to note the points at which these paradigms both link and depart from McGivney's three rationales for Access policies: 'equity', 'pragmatism' and 'economic national interest' given on p.29 of this report.

The first of the paradigms is that of 'employability'; the increasing importance of 'human capital' as a determinant of employability, and of the capacity of enterprises and economies to adapt to change and remain competitive. The connection here is with 'economic national interest', the third of McGivney's rationales. To be educationally disadvantaged therefore is to lack the skills and competencies required by the labour market (Ronayne, *ibid.*, p.3).

In the second paradigm, the problems of educational disadvantage are associated with a perceived deterioration in social cohesion, and alienation from social processes. This paradigm is concerned with threats to solidarity so that educational disadvantage is not about simply being excluded from the labour market, but from society, and the threat to the realisation of individual and social potential (ibid., p.4). On the face of it this does not link directly to McGivney's 'pragmatism and expediency', though the timing of Access initiatives may be expeditious, as in the UK Department of Education and Science's invitation to civic institutions to establish Access provision for ethnic minority groups in 1978 (Parry, 1996, p.16). The final paradigm that of equality, is concerned with redressing inequalities in Access, participation, outcomes and conditions and there is a direct link here with McGivney's 'equity and social justice' rationale. Increasingly, there is a concern with achieving an equality of educational outcomes: it is not sufficient that there is equality in relation to formal admission to educational provision. Equality of outcomes must be achieved in terms of the level and types of qualifications obtained, and progression to the labour market (ibid., p.5). Within this paradigm one can see a clear pointer towards Access provision though other paradigms have been 'expeditiously' linked with Access, as the occasion demands.

Use of the first paradigm associated with human capital can be traced back to the OECD (1973) report 'Recurrent Education: A Strategy for Lifelong Learning'. The radical proposal here was the spreading of educational opportunities over an individual's lifetime rather than being wholly vested in initial education. This proposal for 'recurrent' education had the conceptual value of bringing initial education and adult education into a single policy framework, with the main economic benefit being the development of a more flexible relationship between the education and training system and the needs of the labour market spread over the lifetime of individuals. The aim of measures intended to combat educational disadvantage was to enhance individual employability, promote adaptability in the labour market and underpin economic competitiveness and growth. Practical policy was concerned with ensuring the supply and uptake of education and training, determining the appropriate balance between educational and vocational training and devising alternative forms of

accreditation. Whilst this may seem far from Access provision, its justification is often couched in these 'human capital' terms (Ronayne, 1999c, p.3).

As early as 1976, a 'Resolution of the Council of the European Union' (CEC 1976) confirmed a principle of co-operation in relation to the third paradigm, 'equality of opportunity' through educational intervention, but it was difficult at this time to agree precise educational measures given the autonomy of member states in relation to education (Brock & Tulasiewicz, 1980, pp.3-4).

Moving on, *The Single European Act* of 1986 had, amongst its social implications,

"The elimination of disparities, leading to an improvement in human and physical conditions" (CEC, 1986),

indicating an equality issue, linked to the third paradigm. At this time there was a movement towards the integration and harmonisation of systems, with the driving force towards integration being economic internationalism, and a growing collaboration in the areas of vocational and professional training, but with no reference to 'education' per se in the Act, since this was not yet the responsibility of the Commission.

However, since the 1990's the E.U.'s interest in education and training in the member states has increased considerably. For example, 'Access and participation in education and training' was one of the four main areas of action addressed by the European Commission's⁶ Task Force on Human Resources, Training and Youth in 'The Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community' (1991). This document identified increased Access to higher education as a critical area for future higher education and

⁶ The Commission is the EU's executive institution which operates a civil service and 23 Directorates, with DGV XXX111 dealing with education and training.

states were required to show their plans for preparatory or Access courses leading to higher education.⁷

An interesting and erudite report from another European inter-governmental agency was published the following year. Entitled, 'For a Socialising Type of Adult Education' (Bogard, 1992) it takes a complex view of educational disadvantage, but highlights the second paradigm that of social exclusion, and suggests that educational disadvantage may be characterised by

"a certain isolation in the sense of non-membership of voluntary networks 'a relationship with materiality of social relations in work of the most standardised and repetitive kind', and 'an inability to move about in the empire of signs to carry out the decoding and discernment essential to the effective use of information" (p.18).

In relation to such Access provision for such socially excluded groups, the quotation above reinforces the claims made by Tett (1993) and Hedoux (1982) of the problems in reaching and recruiting socially excluded groups, given their alienation from many social processes.

In his comment on the Commission's 1994 White Paper on 'Growth and Competitiveness', Tuijnman points out an interesting fact - that there has been a consistent decline in international public spending on education relative to total public spending, and this decline has been more pronounced in Europe (Tuijnman, 1995, p.27). He estimates that the cost of closing the participation gaps in formal education systems at the three critical stages of: early childhood; secondary; and tertiary education would need for most countries an additional quarter to one per cent of GDP. He highlights the role planned for governments in monitoring and steering developments and redistributing resources rather than in directly paying for a system of lifelong learning, and calls for the co-operation and co-ordination among many policy sectors (Tuijnman, *ibid.*, p. 31).

⁷ The Irish response to the document will be discussed in Chapter 6 of this report.

An important European document of the 1990's, representing the Commission's first policy statement on the responsibilities for education and training it was given under the Maastricht Treaty, is the White Paper of 1995, entitled 'Teaching and Learning: Towards a Learning Society'. This report stresses the key factors of the internationalism of trade, the dawning of the information society and the "relentless march of science and technology" (p.5) as a reason for the development of lifelong learning strategies in the European Union. It also states that a special effort has to be made for the most vulnerable sections of the population, particularly in urban areas hardest hit by unemployment (p.48), and talks of a common European dimension in lifelong learning, and in human resources strategy. Field (1998, pp.75-76) claims that The White Paper received a lukewarm reception from the EU Education Ministers, who noted that whilst it endorsed lifelong learning, its emphasis was both focused mainly on the initial school system, and vocational education. They also felt that the Report encroached on Member States sovereignty in relation to education.

However, human resource initiatives have been important mechanisms in promoting Access. The introduction of the European Social Fund followed by the Human Resource Initiatives in the 1980's represented another means by which the EU has attempted to tackle human resource development and translate aspirations of social inclusion into practical measures (Ir. Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, n.d.). Pádraig Flynn the ex- European Commissioner for Social Affairs in his opening address to the 'EMPLOYMENT' Conference held in Dublin in 1996, stressed two key concepts in human resource development, first investment, and second, partnership, pointing out that the 'EMPLOYMENT' initiative had as one of its four key points, access to education and training. (EU, 1997, p.8). This initiative directly focused on projects with a transnational element, and with a large Access aspect, including the development of progression routes to education, qualifications and training, and thence the labour market (ibid., p. ix). In relation to the paradigms highlighted at the beginning of this section, Ronayne points out that ESF programmes whose principal objective is employment rather than the development of human potential have paradoxically, been found by the ESF Evaluation Unit to be the least successful in supporting the achievement of employment by the long-term

unemployed (Ronayne, 1999c, p.7). This provides another rationale for Access programmes to higher education for disadvantaged target groups rather than those programmes based purely on the acquisition of vocational skills and competencies.

Tuijnman (1996, p.15) points out that numerous European reports of the 1990's talk of investment in lifelong learning as imperative for all citizens. For example, both the European Commission's White Paper on 'Growth, Competitiveness and Employment' and the Paris meeting of the Education Ministers in 1996 (Field, 1998, p.76) discuss an agenda for educational reform and renewal to support the aspirations of the 1995 White Paper - a transition to learning societies in which equal opportunities are open to all, access is unrestricted and all individuals are encouraged and motivated to learn. In short, an equality of opportunity agenda.

'The Luxembourg Employment Summit' of 1996 with its four pillars, including that of equality of opportunity represents a real step forward in creating institutional structures that will create a framework for action (INOUE, 1998). This Summit recognises the right for workers to get training and re-training. It also requires Employment Guidelines to be set out, with the testing of good practice in EU Member States. Thus the 1998 Employment Guidelines called for National Action Plans to ensure the transfer of Employment Guidelines into National Strategies, with a yearly review. For example there are a number of different strands to the social inclusion strategy of the Irish Dept. of Social, Community and Family Affairs including a 'Back to Education Allowance' for socially excluded adults, and options for training at secondary and tertiary education levels. These strategies, including the provision of financial support for socially excluded adults, whilst not a direct contribution to Access provision are an indispensable adjunct since financial barriers feature most highly in the situational barriers to education highlighted in the writings of Cross (op. cit.).

Another four pillars – this time of education, are erected in the UNESCO 1996 report – 'Learning the Treasure Within'. This report, arising from the deliberations of the 'International Commission for Education for the Twenty

First Century' under the chairmanship of Jacques Delors, presents a view of the fundamental purposes that education must serve for individuals and societies. These are as follows:

- "learning to know – literacy, learning to learn - mastering the instruments of knowledge;
- learning to do – concerned with supporting vocational and occupational development;
- learning to live together – derived from the prevalence of racism and lack of solidarity between rich and poor;
- learning to be – learning to solve life's problems, being competent decision-makers" (p.86).⁸

Perhaps Access provision cannot, in itself meet all these purposes. Harrison, (1993, p.15) points out that Access courses themselves are not a sufficient response to the inequalities that exist in the distribution of educational resources. However, Access can certainly fulfil the objectives of the first two fundamental purposes of education listed above, and perhaps elements of all four can be found within the various discourses through which the Access debate is constructed.

That the European Union is moving towards more direct and co-ordinated action in relation to lifelong learning is shown in the Commission's communication 'Towards a Europe of Knowledge' (CEC, 1997) whose purpose is to set out the guidelines for future community action in the areas of education, training and youth for the period 2000-2006. It also paved the way for the relevant legal instruments to be enacted in 1998 with relevant decisions made in 1999, and their entry into force from January 2000. The inclusion of legal instruments shows that the EU itself has moved forward considerably from the aspirational tone but lack of implementation strategies enshrined in documents of the 1970s.

Wagner (1999, p. 9) points out that policies in the OECD (and presumably the EU) are beginning to reflect an approach to learning that emphasises

⁸ Field (1998) claims that UNESCO as an older, but less influential international body can afford to make general claims for the virtues of learning, though without being able to impose decisions on its members.

inclusiveness and a focus on diversity in learning. The OECD Education Ministers have formally accepted lifelong learning for all as the guiding principle for policy strategies (ibid. p.14) an important commitment, and one also spearheaded from the EMPLOYMENT and Human Resource initiatives, albeit on a project basis. As will be seen later when discussing Irish Access initiatives, one complaint about some of the existing provision, including our own at MIT is that it was too reliant on such short- term funding and did not have much impact on the system overall.

EU policy also informs recent policy debates such as those outlined in the 1998 Irish 'Green Paper on Adult Education' which recommends a continuum of educational provision as envisaged in the European Commission's 'White Paper on Education' of 1995 (ibid.) and directly mentions Access provision (Ir. Department of Education and Science, 1998, p.84). It can be seen that the Union's impact on Access provision has not been direct, but it has been significant. First it has moved from aspirational views of a European dimension in education and lifelong learning, to comparative research on systems and best practice, to a commitment through ESF funding of pilot educational projects, towards a policy level with guidelines for national practice and target- setting in relation to unemployment, education and training.

The impact of EU-funded measures has been manifested in Ireland (and throughout Europe) in major Access initiatives such as the NOW (New Opportunities for Women) Access programmes developed by the Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) which aim to increase participation by women in engineering, science and technical education at third level. This NOW programme was first run by CIT from 1992 to 1994, and subsequently disseminated to six other institutes of technology (EMPLOYMENT, NOW, 1994). The EU has also funded programmes such as the pilot Access course for adults run by MIT in 1995-6, and mainstreamed by the Dept. of Education and Science in 2000, and the provision of an educational guidance service for disadvantaged adults in 1998-1999. Recent EU initiatives have focused on the development of Access courses for unemployed men in Cork Institute of Technology (WRC, 1998) and a variety of other Access initiatives, including one by the Department of

Education and Science itself (Ir. Department of Education and Science, 1998, pp.55-56) in relation to the support structures necessary in relation to Access provision.

This latter section of the chapter has examined the impact of the European Union on Access provision, including some paradigms of educational disadvantage driving 'European' educational policy, followed by an examination of European legislation underpinning the implementation of Access policies in member states. Chapter 5 will look in more detail at this *implementation in a selected number of member states and also in Australia*, in order to identify the lessons that can be learned from Access policies and practices.

Chapter 5. Access Provision: a Comparative Analysis

Before investigating other sources of influence on Access provision for adults in Ireland, it is worth considering the situation in a selected number of countries. The most useful comparisons are those with the UK, but also with Australia since as a country with a Commonwealth former colonial status it inherited systems of higher education generated from the English nineteenth century tradition. With these comparisons, practices in relation to the situation of adults in higher education may be put into an overall context and used to illuminate the Irish experience of Access.

In fact the most recent comparative report on Access, that by Malcolm Skilbeck aided by Helen Connell (2000a), was commissioned by the Irish Higher Education Authority with the aim of considering international trends in equity in higher education, and thereby identifying strategies showing promise in meeting policy objectives. There is thus a clear rationale for this type of comparative analysis. Skilbeck's report deserves extensive consideration, especially his reflections on the international impact of equity initiatives, so this chapter will devote more space to his analysis than to that of other commentators.

To begin however with specific countries, Britain now has a largely unitary system of higher education, since the twenty former polytechnics were given university status at the beginning of the 1990s.¹ It is claimed that this upgrading initially had a deleterious effect on the Access movement, since the 'new' universities were not so keen as before to attract students from Access courses. Parry reports in the mid-nineties a tension between issues of equality and of academic standards, evidencing a trend in the new universities to try to attract younger students with good A level grades to justify their status and fulfil Funding Council quality requirements (Parry, 1995, p.117). He states that the polytechnics of the 1970's and 80's did seek out and attract mature, non- traditional students, without A level entry qualifications. They were encouraged in this by the metropolitan authorities responsible for the polytechnics, and containing large numbers of people

¹ The colleges of higher education and the university colleges remain as higher education institutions without full university status.

from the ethnic minorities and other groups, who required educational interventions in the interests of social justice (ibid., p.115). Be that as it may, a third of undergraduates in the English universities are now over the age of twenty one, with ethnic minorities well-represented (DfEE, 2001).² Even back in 1992 there were more mature students studying in higher education than younger students, and four per cent of these were Access students (Parry, op. cit., p.104). While this included students studying part-time and with the Open University, it does put into perspective how closed the Irish third-level system still is, with its current intake of only five per cent adult students overall (Ir. Department of Education and Science, 1998, p.48). A division began to open up in the mid-nineties in the UK HE sector, with the new universities more involved with widening participation, and the traditional ones with research. However, the UK government has from 2000 rewarded universities for recruiting students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Thomson, 1999). This has lessons for us here in Ireland, since though we still have a binary system with different missions for each of the partners, the future may suggest more blurred provision.

One aspect of the British experience of Access provision has been the development of Access networks such as the 'North and East London Accreditation Federation' and Open College networks providing Access courses which are then accredited and validated by authorised validating agencies.³ By 1995, over half of the authorised validating agencies in the UK were members of the National Open College Network (Parry, 1996, p. 29). These networks now report to a central body, the Quality Assurance Agency that has the responsibility for licensing and reviewing Access courses, with a new recognition scheme for Access programmes (QAAHE, 1999, p.12). In 2000 the Higher Education Funding Council set up the Access Advisory Partnership to help institutions develop Access strategies (Wagner, 2000).

Hayes reported that in 1994 there were more than thirty thousand students

² Mature age as a percentage of enrolment may be a misleading indicator. In Sweden for example, the average age has risen, not necessarily because there are more adults, but because young students are staying on longer (Wagner 2002, p.3).

³ There are now 23 such agencies in England (DfEE, 2001).

enrolled on more than a thousand Access courses,⁴ half of whom were on generic courses, the others on courses in specific subject disciplines. Sixty per cent of Access students were reported as bringing their Access studies to a successful completion, and thirteen thousand Access students were admitted to degree level courses in higher education (Hayes, 1997, p.20). By 2000 Access students constituted eight per cent of HE admissions, though recent statistics suggest a lower figure, reflecting a more general downturn in applications from mature students (Thomas, 2000). By comparison, Irish numbers of Access student numbers and courses, even utilising the most recent figures, as given in Chapter 8, are miniscule.

Parry (1996, p.12) suggests that the liberal education tradition was a spur to the development of Access provision for adults and Cox (1997, p.54), points out a long-standing link with certain strands of university adult and continuing education, suggesting that university adult education is the natural home of Access provision. For instance, one of the earliest institutions to offer Access courses for adults in the early 1970's was Magee College in Derry (D'Arcy, 1995, p.52). Courses were developed with the aim of providing accelerated access to undergraduate studies, necessary as the selective UK system barred entry to university education for many groups. It is claimed that the Magee Foundation Course did also serve adults from the less favoured social and economic groups - manual workers, the unemployed or those whose homes were the council estates surrounding the city (D'Arcy, p.55). The Magee Course now continues, kite-marked by the University of Ulster with its students going in substantial numbers to the various university faculties, especially Humanities, Social or Health Sciences.

*It is now commonplace for Access courses to be provided within further education, and in collaboration with higher education providers, as the Magee/University of Ulster collaboration shows (Cox, *ibid.*, p.53). This collaboration may act to obviate any problems faced by the new universities in taking in large numbers of non-traditional students on to what may be perceived as sub-degree level courses. Parry claims that there is now a*

⁴ The number of recognised courses in England (almost 2000) has doubled since 1994 (DfEE, 2001).

national strategic effort to establish further education as the site for expanding higher education participation and building progression (1996, p. 26).

The account above of the origins of Access in the 1970's in the UK gives credence to McGivney's 'social justice' rationale discussed in Chapter 3 of this account, but there is also a close connection with Ronayne's second paradigm - 'realisation of human potential' (p.37) and stretches back to a mission for higher education derived from Newman's 1852 'Idea of a University'.

An issue raised by Cox (*ibid.*, p.59) is that of the currency of Access awards in Britain, where he points out that the qualification only has value as an entry ticket to higher courses of study. This is not the case in France where the Diplôme d'Acces aux Études Universitaires (DAEU) has developed as a vocational award as well as a progression certificate (Davies, 1995, p.155). This reference to 'vocational awards' leads to a recent aspect of UK Access provision – that of work-based Access. Whilst work-based Access will not be much use to disadvantaged individuals and groups, it could be useful in capturing traditionally under-represented groups in higher education (Osborne, 1996, p.81). These may be older workers or those engaged in low-skilled work, at risk of social exclusion in the change from manufacturing to knowledge-based organisations. We ran one such Access course in MIT, with the aid of EU funding, and in conjunction with a manufacturing company, and its aim was precisely that as stated above (Cook et al., 1999).

Northern Ireland, with its long tradition of Access courses has some interesting statistics with regard to participation rates in HE. It has high participation rates overall, grown by eighty per cent from a mere thousand entrants in 1962, and higher than in England for traditional young students. However it has fewer mature students than England, in spite of its long tradition of Access courses, though more of these mature students come from working class backgrounds (Field, 1997, p.150). Participation rates incidentally are different for the two major religious persuasions with those from working class Catholic backgrounds more willing to participate than

those from working class Protestant ones (Gallagher et al., 1996). Much of the increase has been at the new University of Ulster which attracts equal numbers of students from non-manual and manual backgrounds (p.74) but there is an under-supply of places overall.

Scotland too developed an effective model of Access in 1979 with the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) which was funded until 1994, but continuing thereafter in reduced form (Spackman, 1995, p.79). Students over the age of twenty one, and not in continuous education could take Access programmes offering guaranteed places on certain degree courses in a consortium of participating universities (ibid., p.78). She claims that SWAP was informed by the UK government's desire to move towards a mass higher education system, based on schemes developed by Strathclyde Regional Council as part of a strategy for socially and economically deprived areas. For instance, in 1991-2, sixteen hundred students were enrolled on Access courses, with half of these over thirty years of age and with forty percent from areas of social deprivation (Paterson, 1997, p.41).

This initiative was also concerned with skills shortages, and indeed one of the aims of SWAP was to widen Access to vocationally relevant higher education. A programme called DEAL (Developing Employment-based Access to Learning), brought together four universities to analyse work-based learning routes in small and medium enterprises. (Davies, 1995, p.246). As one example, the University of Stirling part-time Access programme has used accreditation of prior learning (APL) procedures for the first time in a university pre-entry programme, which stresses the centrality of learning resulting from reflection on experience (Dockrell et al., 1996, p.83).

Another major initiative in widening Access in Scotland was the Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (SCOTCAT), set up in 1991. This involved a formal agreement between all the major institutions of higher education in the country to recognise a similar framework for building credit towards a degree based on four levels of study (Davies, 1995, p.240). Articulation arrangements were also put in place between higher national diplomas and degrees, offering clearly established

progression routes. A number of universities have now developed part-time degree provision (ibid.). Access courses are also being offered through distance learning mode, with some universities, such as the 'virtual' University of the Highlands and Islands developing courses in dual distance and traditional learning modes (Eunson, 1999, p.5).

Davies claims that figures from the mid-nineties estimate approximately a thousand students entering Scottish universities by Access routes, of whom more than half were women (Davies, 1995, pp.246-7). She states that men and women use Access courses for different reasons – women as a first stage in entering the labour market and for men to establish careers before marriage (ibid., p.247).

Overall Access to higher education has been a major policy theme in Scotland and SWAP has been widely studied as a successful model. In a comparative study of Access policies in Scotland and Australia. Osborne et al. (1996, p.421) see Scottish Access provision as the 'third route' into mass higher education after 'Scottish Highers' and vocational qualifications, and reflecting social justice policies at regional level, as shown by the SWAP initiative.

The Australian experience is of particular relevance to this study for a number of reasons, including the fact that Britain, Ireland and Australia traditionally operated very selective entry requirements to higher education (as opposed to that of New Zealand, mentioned earlier in Ch.1; a country where adults were dominant). Australian patterns of participation in HE show a similar expansion to other countries with an increase of nearly sixty per cent of total enrolments between 1981 and 1991, with students over thirty comprising more than a quarter of the student body by 1991 (Postle, 1995, p.12), which is similar to the UK experience. Postle points out that the government encouraged Access in the 1970's, particularly in the Colleges of Advanced Education, when participation rates in higher education were low (ibid., p.15), thereby pursuing a policy of national self-interest. The second of McGivney's rationales given in Chapter 3, that of pragmatism, and instrumental reasons is applicable here. Like Britain, Australia possessed a binary system which was altered in the 1980s, with the Colleges of

With relation to item No.2 on funding, a number of submissions noted the anomaly whereby trainees on Fás (the state training agency) apprenticeship courses are paid four times the amount that an adult is allowed through the Higher Education Maintenance Grant – a clear injustice. However there was a clear divergence of opinion too – some submissions wished for a replication of the standard admission points system, but for adults only, whereas others thought that such an inflexible system would create another set of impossible hurdles for adults to jump. The three submissions made by voluntary bodies all demanded Access to higher education for older adults and was part of a much larger volume of submissions on the educational needs of the elderly. There was general criticism of the 'Green Paper' in that it gave no analysis of reasons for poor participation in higher education by Irish adults in the past.

Another critique of the 'Green Paper' by the Director of the Higher Education Equality Unit (O'Riordan, 1998), points out that there is no reference to how aspirations are to be translated into practice, nor of how the envisaged target of the sixteen per cent of mature students in higher education by the year 2010 is to be achieved. (ibid., p.1) This critique also claims, rightly, that there is a tendency in the report to equate 'mature students' with 'economically disadvantaged students', and while they share the same characteristics, they are not to be conflated (ibid., p.2).

These submissions to the 'Green Paper' were followed by a Consultation Process, culminating in a 'National Forum on Adult Education' in September 1999' (Ir. DES, 2000a, p.3). which summarised the responses and gave an opportunity for the Dept. of Education and Science to reiterate its key policy points *and allow for verbal interchange from interested parties.*

The Department of Education and Science's Access priorities from 1998 onwards became more focused. In November 1998, the-then Minister of Education, Michael Martin, (he became Minister for Health in a cabinet reshuffle in January 2000) at a university equality conference talked of his frustration at the persistence of inequalities within education, and the need for pro-active, co-ordinated and direct measures to increase non-traditional

entry to third-level education, stating, "We need to go to a different level with this"(Martin, 1998b).

Martin, an ex-teacher, genuinely interested in promoting Access and wider progression to higher education indicated a number of initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage at all levels - ones to impact on Access including the creation of a new third-level institution in a disadvantaged area of Dublin, with thirty per cent of places reserved for disadvantaged persons,³ plus significantly enhanced funding for initiatives to aid the disadvantaged.

A major report and conference followed, both of which make some contribution to the Access debate. The De Buitleir "Report of the Review Committee on Post-Secondary Education and Training Places" (1999), presents some useful statistics in relation to adult students. It states that while there were approximately 107,000 mature students in 1997, in various categories of education, the total number in full-time higher education was only 5000, with another 22,000 in part-time higher education. It also points out that school-leavers in the age cohort seventeen to twenty two years are forecast to fall by almost thirty per cent between 1999 and 2001. It recommends that an additional stock of 10,000 places be built up for mature students over a number of years (p.2).

In October 1999 a North-South Education Conference entitled 'Access and Progression in Higher Education' was jointly organised by the UK-based Universities Central Admissions Service (UCAS) and their Irish counterpart, the Irish Central Admissions Office (CAO). The intention behind this conference was the identification of areas of co-operation and a related set of agreed action points. Implicit in this therefore is the intention that both administrations work more closely together in key areas and the power-sharing Executive in Northern Ireland and the government of the Republic have the responsibility of forging these links. The first major evaluation of the HEA's targeted Access initiatives in Ireland was commissioned from Professor Bob Osborne of the University of Ulster

³ Now the Blanchardstown Institute of Technology, one of the fourteen such institutions in the State.

(Osborne & Leith, 2000). In a short time perhaps both Northern Irish and UK agencies will have a say in the shaping of Access policy in Ireland.

At this conference, Minister Martin listed the achievements of his department over the last few years in relation to Access and progression. These included the following:

a) 'The Commission on the Points System' (Hyland, 1999a). The points system is the mechanism whereby applicants are offered places on third-level courses on the basis of the number of points obtained, calculated on the results of the Leaving Certificate. The points required for any course is determined by the number of applicants, their points obtained and the number of places on the course (ibid.). Courses with high points requirements such as medicine or physiotherapy have only a small number of places. One implication is that it is very difficult for adults to gain access to these high points courses, especially if they apply with qualifications other than the Leaving Certificate. 'The Points Commission', set up by Minister Martin, aimed to investigate whether the points system meets the needs of all those who now aspire to higher education. Its report, disappointingly, gives broad support for the existing system but recognises that by treating all students equally, existing inequalities are reinforced, and inequalities of outcome supported (ibid.). The Report recommends that more places be allocated on a quota basis to mature students, and a more flexible approach taken to alternative qualifications and activities, such as those possessed by mature students. It recommends too that a National Access Officer for the Disadvantaged be appointed to support current initiatives at third-level. It also recommends that Access courses be developed by the further education Vocational Educational Committees (VEC) and PLC (Post Leaving Certificate) sector, rather than by the higher education sector itself, which would mirror current Access practice in the UK.

The AMA (Access Made Available) group of Access Officers, in its 'Response to the Report of the Points Commission (AMA, 2000) are wary of Access courses being developed and run outside the higher education sector,

since they feel that such courses would not familiarise students with academic life, nor enable them to anticipate the pitfalls and problems they would encounter in third - level institutions. They would not welcome therefore the current UK model of Access and its delivery outside the higher education system. However, one of the problems of Irish education as it is now constituted is this lack of coherence and articulation between different sectors dealing with the same target group.

b) The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999) provides for the development of a national framework of qualifications, setting out the arrangements for Access transfer and progression for learners. This national framework will constitute a single nationally and internationally accepted certification structure covering all extra university, third-level education and training programmes (Martin 1999, p.7). Three new bodies have therefore been set up, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education Training Awards Council (Scharf et al., 1999, p.15). There is also the potential of cross-border collaboration through:

- the establishment of a credit framework system and the wider adoption of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS);
- qualifications which allow for a ladder of progression from national certificate to national diploma to ab-initio and one year 'add-on' degrees;
- an ACCS (Accumulation of Credits and Certification of Subjects) scheme which allows students to take single subjects and build these towards a qualification;
- APL procedures (Deasy, 1999, pp.18-19).

All of these can be seen as potential Access mechanisms, albeit sometimes cumbersome, arduous for students and administratively testing, as in the case of APL and ACCS procedures. With regard to the Qualifications Framework overall, this is an initiative which when operational, will promote Access through the adoption of a basic language and standard numerical measures of learning achievement. It is however disappointing that, as in the UK the universities will not be covered by this framework, thereby reinforcing the perception of them as more elitist institutions,

lacking the accessible progression routes or even the accountability which will be enforced throughout the remainder of the third level educational sector.

c) In relation to funding for Access initiatives, the Minister stated that the HEA had provided £1.2 million since 1997 for university initiatives for disadvantaged students - £4.5 million overall to the Targeted Initiatives including those to second level schools and disadvantaged areas (Clancy, 1999a, pp.8-9). In 1998 the Irish government provided £57 million for a two-year programme of initiatives on educational disadvantage (Martin, 1999, p.7). No specific funding for Access provision was allocated to the institutes of technology sector until the 'New Deal' programme was announced in 1999 (Ir. Department of Education and Science, 1999), which allocated £95 m. for Access initiatives and mature students. Then, the announcement to the institutes of technology of an £8 allowance per student for Access and retention initiatives, to be taken from the capitation fee, caused some puzzlement for those institutions that had not had Access on their agendas. In June 2000, the Department of Education and Science finally announced that the institutes could make permanent appointments of Access Officers, so there is at least equality now between the university and institute of technology sectors and some secure, rather than short-term, pilot project appointments.

The Minister also stated that at third-level, resources were to be targeted at *an extension of the maintenance grant scheme so that all independent mature students would qualify for the higher level of grant*. However this higher level of grant only amounted to Ir£1624 per annum, whereas other Social Welfare payments are worth almost four times this amount).

d) The Minister's final reference at the conference to non-completion issues is an interesting one (Martin, 1999, pp.6-7). The Irish higher education system has high non-completion rates, as shown by a survey of students who first registered in the institutes of technology in 1996-7. The attrition rate is up to thirty seven per cent of first- year enrolments, significantly higher than the UK and Scandinavia (Healy et al., 1999, p.2).

Reasons for non-completion include wrong course choice and insufficient opportunities for transfer, failing examinations, difficulties with the course, personal family problems and financial problems (ibid.). Most of these are also problems for Access students, and the solutions apply to both. These range from the importance of ongoing guidance and support, better communication and feedback between staff and students, the establishment of personal tutoring systems and better preparation for third level. If the institutes put measures such as these in place to deal with retention, then consistent with findings of this research, the path will also be eased for Access students.

Apart from the proposed directions given by Minister Martin as to Access development, the conference also heard from Professor Pat Clancy, who stated that there is least information on the 'disability' category of students; with the most reliable estimate of approximately one per cent of the student population having a physical disability.⁴ Students with such a disability he states must be enabled to participate fully in college life and far greater resources are needed than are at present available.

The long-awaited 'Learning for Life: the Irish White Paper on Adult Education', (Ir. Department of Education and Science, 2000b) was published in August 2000. This paper demonstrates more advanced thinking than its predecessor the 'Green Paper' (ibid., 1998) in relation to the rationale, justification for and scope of adult education. The scope of the White Paper is in setting out a rationale for investment in adult education, and it provides an overview of the latest trends in the educational attainment of Irish adults. It also traces the policy developments since the publication of the 'Green Paper' and highlights the issues raised in the Consultation Process. The 'White Paper' makes a series of recommendations for future developments to expand and promote adult Access to further and higher education (ibid., 2000b, p.4).

In this document, the authors highlight the main concern voiced in the

⁴ Cognitive problems or conditions like dyslexia are not on the whole categorised as a disability in Ireland.

Consultation Process; that there was too much emphasis on economic goals at the expense of personal and collective ones. (ibid., p.75) They are at pains here to redress the balance, pointing out that the role of higher education had previously been understated (ibid., p.74). Six priority areas are now identified:

- consciousness raising, with adult education as an empowering process of self- discovery;
- citizenship, aiming that all will participate in democratic processes;
- cohesion, focusing on enhancing social capital and inclusion;
- competitiveness, in providing a skilled workforce;
- cultural development - enriching the cultural fabric of society, and
- community-building referring to the role of adult education in fostering a communal sense of purpose (ibid., p.29).

It can be seen here that the economic emphasis is not ranked as high in priority as personal, political and social development, and that individual purposes are balanced by collective ones. Moreover the authors are keen to stress not simply equality of Access but of participation and outcome (ibid., p.13). This conceptualisation serves to bring the 'White Paper' much more closely in line with Skilbeck's views on equity and Access than was the case in the 'Green Paper'.

The government also responded to the recommendations received from the Consultation Process including:

- a refusal to abolish fees for all part-time adult students as recommended by a large number of groups because of the huge number of adults in the Irish population (approximately a third of the total) with less than upper-secondary level education. The strategy instead will be to develop core services such as guidance and ICT structures, and to target literacy and disadvantage.(Ir. DES, 2000b, p.5) However, fees will be abolished for part-time third-level students who are medical card-holders or in receipt of welfare benefits. The Dearing Committee in the UK also came out against free fees for part-time adult education (Dearing, 1997), but then there are learning credit schemes, and lower costs of adult course provision in the UK.

- a call for the setting of overall national targets for participation in higher education and an accompanying strategic plan, together with incentives to institutions and individuals to increase participation. The government has responded by setting up the 'Commission on Access' referred to earlier in this chapter;
- the need for support to allow colleges to institutionalise mature student - friendly processes. The 'White Paper' provides for the development of services to support Access such as an educational guidance service, staff development and childcare (ibid., p.68);
- the need for mechanisms to translate part-time students pursuing nationally-certified courses into full-time equivalent students for funding purposes (ibid). Submissions had commented on the fact that the concept of fulltime/part-time student is becoming increasingly redundant as more students pursue modularised flexible study patterns. The 'White Paper' has not yet set up mechanisms, but is perhaps awaiting direction from the new Qualifications Authority.

One observation here - the 'Green Paper' makes little comment on Access for older learners, and agencies representing this target group were very critical of this omission. The government has responded by providing a few paragraphs in the 'White Paper' mentioning the potential of older adults, for example, as mentors or literacy volunteers. This section also refers to the need to recruit and retain older workers, and states there are no age barriers to educational opportunities, including free access to a number of educational schemes (ibid., p.167). Overall this section is aspirational in tone, and offers no concrete measures or opportunities to this group.

The 'White Paper' recommendations relating to Access include the following (Ir. Department of Education and Science, 2000b, pp.137-176):

- the establishment of a competitive targeted mature student fund to promote institution-wide strategies to increase mature student Access on the basis of national criteria. The aim is to encourage cross-faculty

approaches and partnerships with networks to share good practice, followed by its mainstreaming. The fund will increase to £10 m. per annum on a phased basis. This recommendation is in line with Skilbeck's comment on the importance of incentives, and may be compared with the Australian government's allocation of \$5.5 million per year which appears to have been so effective. In relation to networking, an Equality Committee, drawn from six institutes of technology is being revived, so perhaps this partnership approach has already begun and will bear fruit;

- fees to be abolished for part-time courses for disadvantaged adult participants. This applies to Access programmes, national certificate, diploma and first degree programmes, and nationally certified distance learning programmes. This has not yet been operationalised, nor does anyone know how this will work, so its effectiveness remains to be seen. In order to further consider reducing financial barriers a working group will be set up to establish the feasibility and cost of tax relief for investment by employers in student fees, and fees paid by students on nationally-certified courses. These measures are again in line with Skilbeck's observations on the need to reduce financial barriers (Skilbeck & Connell, 2000b, p.7) whilst they do not go far enough in the direction of recommendations made by groups responding to the 'Green Paper';
- the need for flexibility in access and delivery of higher education programmes, including the better use of timing, the modularisation and semesterisation of programmes, off-campus provision and expanded use of delivery modes, including the greater use of open and distance learning. Presumably the funds detailed under the 1999 'New Deal', National Development Plan can be utilised for this purpose. With regard to assessment and accreditation, the 'White Paper' talks of the necessity to accredit prior learning, promote inter-institutional credit transfer and accumulation, and utilise a wide range of assessment procedures including the expansion of single module certification (Ir. Department of Education and Science, 2000b, p.141). All this will only happen if the

National Qualifications Authority begins to exercise its overall authority and pull some of the accrediting bodies into line.

Given the totality of measures and financial allocations suggested both in the 'White Paper' and in other recent policy initiatives discussed above, then the opportunities should be available to make a substantial difference to adults seeking access to higher education in Ireland. There appears to be a consensus on the need for an increase in the number of adult students, for target-setting, quotas and for a national Access Service. The government has already demonstrated its commitment to the provision of funding, whether through an increase in the maintenance grant, incentives to institutions, or childcare and others support for students. The emphasis on a flexible approach to entry to HE, whether through Access courses, the accreditation of prior learning, or through work-based learning is also emphasised. As always, it will be changing the culture within the institutions themselves that will be the most difficult stumbling block.

Following the 'White Paper' the Irish Government's 'Programme for Prosperity and Fairness' (Ir. 2000) instigated a 'Commission on Access in Ireland', to report by December 2000. This shows the issue as a broader one than the Department of Education and Science alone can tackle, including that of inter-ministerial co-operation, and policy coherence and complementarity. 'The Report of the Action Group on Third-Level Education' - the Commission on Access mentioned above - (Mcnamara, 2001), was launched by the Minister of Education in July 2001. It has seventy seven recommendations, most of which appear to have been accepted by the government. Some which are directly within government's remit have already been acted on, especially the changes in the student grant. The main recommendations are as follows:

- the highest rate of maintenance grant to be fixed at £3000 for students living fifteen miles from college;
- a national co-ordinating Access office to be set up by Autumn 2001
- there should be close monitoring of participation and completion rates for mature students;

- by 2006 almost two per cent of undergraduates on full-time third-level courses should be students with disabilities;
- third-level institutions should set aside at least fifteen per cent of full-time undergraduate places for mature students;
- third-level institutions should develop alternative entry routes to college other than the Leaving Certificate;
- mentoring systems should be put in place for mature students;
- coherence and integration are necessary across the education levels;
- area- based partnerships should put strategies in place to promote Access.

These measures explicitly draw on Skilbeck and Connell's categorisation of effective, comprehensive and coherent Access policy and practices, incorporating:

- state actions;
- expanding provision;
- achieving diversity and flexibility;
- moving towards policy coherence
- networks and frameworks;
- focus on institutions;
- improving overall performance;
- finance and resourcing (Macnamara, 2001, p.23).

If these are seriously taken on board then government will have gone a long way towards fulfilling the demands of policy documents from 1995 onwards, and will make a substantial difference to the Irish Access scene.

The Academic Oligarchies

The second group identified by Clark (1983) as stakeholders in the higher education field, the 'academic oligarchies', have responded variably to the challenges posed by Access. At the end of 1998, the Council of the Heads of Irish Universities (CHIUI) commissioned the AMA to conduct a national survey of all the HEA's targeted initiatives (not simply in relation to adults), perhaps as a preliminary to setting up the seven universities' own Access structures or policies (AMA, 1998). This would have left the Council of

Directors of the institutes of technology to do likewise (or nothing), thereby perpetuating a two-fold system, and perhaps inequalities in HE. This was a particular danger given the legal obligations in relation to Access which are much stronger for the universities than for the institutes of technology. For instance the Universities Act of 1997 (section 18b) requires the universities to prepare statements of policy on Access, and to show how they will implement these policies. The institutes of technology on the other hand have no such requirement. Section 7 of the RTC Act (1992) simply requires the governing body to have regard to 'equality of opportunity' in education, but with no further requirement.

This goes some way to explaining why the Irish universities were initially more proactive in terms of Access than the institutes (with the exception of MIT and CIT). Moreover, the HEA targeted initiatives mentioned above only operated in the universities.⁵ The danger then was two-fold - of an elitist Access programme, and of a lack of sustained interest by the institutes of technology, which, like the new universities in the UK, would have pursued other agendas, such as those relating to research.

Verbal representations to the 'Commission of Access', including one by myself and my colleagues have made the point that there should be one national co-ordinating office for Access. The Macnamera Report endorses this by stating that the HEA, whose role is now expanding to cover the whole HE sector should be the home of this body, and has provided some compelling reasons why this should be the case (2001, p.125). There are few other bodies in Ireland that would have the expertise to take on this responsibility.

Some universities and colleges are showing considerable vision in relation to tackling disadvantage, such as Trinity College in Dublin which is building a new Centre of Educational Opportunities to be based in Dublin's dockland, and offering many new opportunities to disadvantaged communities (Healy, 1998). The National College of Ireland, also situated

⁵ Though Chapter 7 shows that the institutes are becoming increasingly involved in Access provision.

in Dublin, and also moving to the docklands, has a reputation both for tackling inner city disadvantage and for using the new technology and flexible forms of delivery. The other major university in Dublin in UCD also has some highly visible Access programmes, and two outstanding 'Access' researchers though both Clancy (1995b) and Lynch (1997) have highlighted the barriers to Access within their own institution.

At the other end of the scale though there are a number of HE institutions which are not so Access friendly. For example, it is noteworthy that only three of the fourteen institutes of technology made submissions to the government in relation to the 'Green' or White Papers' on Adult education (see p.67).

The 'Access Made Available' group, referred to earlier, was initially comprised of Access officers from the universities, but has since 2000 expanded to cover the institutes of technology and some organisations dealing with the educationally disadvantaged (AMA, 2000) This body would appear to be taking on in Ireland, a similar role to the 'Forum for Access Studies' described by Parry in his reference to the second wave of UK Access provision (1996, pp.15-20). A number of its members were co-opted to the Access Commission and so have made significant contributions to the Access debate.

In relation to accreditation, the main third - level non-university validating body in Ireland, (HETAC, formerly the NCEA) has also set out a revised policy on Access and re-launched its guidelines for Access courses some years after the idea was first mooted, and considerably later than UK initiatives, as is usual in Irish education (NCEA,1998). Other organisations with an interest for adults in education such as the National Centre for Guidance in Education has pointed out the necessity of a comprehensive guidance system for adults as a pre-requisite to course provision, and that an increase in mature student numbers needs to be accompanied by user-friendly advice and information for such entrants (NCGE, 1998). Since that date it has set up a number of pilot educational guidance schemes, of which REGSA is one.

Mature students

The target group for Access represent another group of stakeholders - mature or prospective mature students, though these are naturally less prominent as a cohesive group. One such however, is the 'Working Class Access Network' (WCAN). This group, whose meetings are co-ordinated by the Higher Education Equality Unit has made a number of recommendations on Access: that policy makers work in partnership with adult learners to draw on their knowledge and expertise and that part-time adult students be given greater recognition and support including an extension of the free fees scheme. The WCAN consider that free tuition fees was a retrograde step, benefiting mostly the middle classes, and they claim that working class and mature student Access would be better expedited by a targeted funding of the Mature Student Grant (WCAN, 2001, pp.14-15). They have also requested a standardised data collection system collecting information on the socio-economic and educational background of mature students, routes of entry and drop-out rates and that this information be recorded and published (WCAN, 1998). They recommend that all colleges develop partnerships with local communities, recognise prior learning, and adopt a uniform selection process for mature students. Moreover, they ask for a re-definition of 'mature student' to include those over twenty one rather than twenty three, in line with 'Back to Education Allowance' criteria, and of practice in Northern Ireland. The government has responded to these requests in part by an extension of the maintenance grant and payment at a higher level of this grant. (and of course by the Commission on Access findings). However the funding is still a long way from the mandatory provision of a grant for all mature students in higher education, and the provision made by other countries such as Denmark which provides a full maintenance grant to all those over nineteen years of age. (Cook, et al., 1999).

With respect to Access course provision, the group ask for nationally recognised and certified Access courses, which should be located in socio-economic disadvantaged areas (ibid.) These courses should maintain quality standards, be offered in all sectors and give increased clarity about whether any Access course guarantees automatic third-level entry. Guaranteed entry

to Access students has generally been a problem in Ireland where there is increased competition for third-level places, but also in the UK. There is now however in the UK an increasing use of 'Access compacts' between HE institutions and schools which guarantee entry to successful Access students.

The network also calls for innovative methods of teaching and learning, such as those provided by the OU and OSCAIL, the Irish distance learning organisation, though with the proviso that this latter form is not particularly suitable for many learners, unless well-resourced learning tutorial centres are also put in place. Their Mission Statement requests that the term 'working class' be put back on the educational agenda (WCAN, 1997). This raises the question if it was ever there in Ireland, and how one goes about putting it back? More to the point, WCAN call for a raising of the profile of 'working class disadvantage' as a crucial issue in educational discourse, including consideration of the views of working class people themselves. Given that the HEEU does provide a forum for the dissemination of these views, then perhaps this request has been partially met.

In relation to this issue of learner empowerment and voice in decision-making, Fleming (1998) describes how university students generally have to adopt their experience and knowledge to that of the institution rather than the other way around. Harrison claims that this is ultimately self-defeating in that:

"If learning is offered only on the terms, and according to the definitions only of professional educators, it can never achieve equality of access and will always be less attractive to those outside the current audience of habitual participants" (1993, p.17).

However, a sociological empirical analysis carried out by the Equality Studies Centre of UCD discusses the way that institutional structures may be negotiated and changed by the working classes themselves. The author claims that there are multiple sites of 'action for resistance' with the

possibility of individual and collective transformatory action, and the identification of strategies for change. Lynch & O' Riordan (1998, pp.445-475) claim that

"Working class students negotiate and inhabit the educational system with an eye to the opportunities which are open, and those which are not" (ibid. p.474).

More prosaically, recent research reported by the European Access Network (EAN, 2001), identifies effective collaborative strategies, which include the learner's voice in decision-making about educational provision. This is the kind of strategy asked for by the WCAN, though not too visible in Ireland as yet.

The Media

In order to arrive at the perceptions generated by the media, a contents analysis of newspaper reporting in Ireland over a year from 1998 to 1999 was undertaken in order to show how, and to what extent, the issues of educational disadvantage were presented to the public. This was to a fairly sophisticated reading public since the newspapers analysed were the serious broadsheets, mainly 'The Irish Times', and one 'Sunday newspaper, 'The Sunday Tribune'. Thirty two articles were identified, and scrutinised for key indicators as a guide to content. It is difficult to say if this represents a substantial amount of coverage – it certainly appears to be, with some coverage every two to three days, particularly in the Autumn of 1998, and related perhaps to the timing of government press releases.

Cross's typology of situational, institutional and dispositional factors relating to participation was used to classify factors identified from headlines, and from content analysis. 'Situational' refers to the life situation or context in which adults study; 'institutional' relates to the characteristics of educational institutions or providers, and 'dispositional' is associated with the motivation or attitudes of adults with regard to education (Cross, 1981).

Forty per cent of the news items fell into the 'institutional category' with one major institutional factor concerning the rationale for Access initiatives, particularly, the balance of social justice versus economic considerations. Clancy (1995b, p.112) observes that it is expeditious in Ireland that recent economic considerations have converged with those of equity. The economic argument for Access is clearly articulated in the press by a leading Irish academic, in an article entitled 'Investment at Third Level Vital to Fuel the Continuing Economic Growth Boom' (O'Hare, 1999). Another article examining the economic theme is entitled 'UCD Warns of False Economy', (IT, 1998). The equity argument is less visible, though it can be inferred from an article with the heading, 'Education Rights a Key to Budget Dilemmas' (O'Toole, 1999) and 'Falling % of Poor at University' (Smyth, 1999).

Robertson (1997) expressing his dismay about the current lack of commitment to Access in the UK points to another discourse important in considering the values of Access – that of participation in civil society. He sees Access to higher education as,

"an indicator of the success with which a nation organises its commitment to democratic stability' as a form of modern social contract" (p.15).

This expression of values is touched on in an article discussing Trinity College Dublin's new 'Centre for Educational Access and Community Development' and the Provost's claims for the value of education, and the need to develop capacity building in disadvantaged communities. (Healy, 1998). The Provost's is a lone academic voice however in pursuing this 'democratic' rationale, and much secondary to other discourses, ranging from at one spectrum the budget, economy and skills shortages, to on the other, those of disadvantage and inequality. Davies, (1997, p.287) writing about the UK experience comments on the rhetoric of equality of opportunity, and the tension that exists between rights, equity and the servicing of economic need. Here too, in Ireland, the rhetoric exceeds the practice.

For example, there was much educational hype in the press at the end of 1998 about measures in the Budget to help the disadvantaged - 'largest ever focus on the problem' (Pollak, 1998c) and it was left to the Director of the Combat Poverty Agency, to point out that spending projects are no substitutes for coherent well-thought out strategies in relation to disadvantage, including the provision of Access initiatives (ibid.).

Conversely, the press coverage illustrates some repudiation of the claim that Ireland's economy is so successful because of its very well- educated workforce. Government ministers are now beginning to admit to Ireland's abysmal record in relation to adult education, and there is now much public quoting of OECD comparative literacy figures(OECD,2000). Even the Head of the Higher Education Equality Unit admits that the organisation set up to promote equality of opportunity only preaches to the converted, but finds no way of progressing its message. (Irish Times, 1998). A newspaper article entitled 'College Equations' (Healy, 1999) points out that statements of equality of opportunity in education fail to indicate who is going to assist the non-university sector in the work of reviewing their equality strategies since they have no equivalent of the university 'Visitation' to monitor implementation of policies and objectives. It appears from these last two articles that government rhetoric on widening participation is being publicly challenged by professional reality.

The remainder of the articles examined stress different aspects of situational barriers for students - students from disadvantaged inner city areas highlighted in TCD' plans (Pollak, 1998); school drop-outs and early school-leavers (Foley, 1998, O'Morain, 1999) for example. Not surprisingly, 'dispositional' aspects do not feature so highly, though one much quoted article is entitled 'Mature Applicants are Unhappy' (Byrne, 1999), which lists the many reasons for their unhappiness, ranging from lack of transparency in application procedures, lack of places, of educational guidance and of funding.

If the newspaper coverage is examined in its totality, then institutional interests including those of the state are the most prominent, with the

articulation of rights, equity, or economic need as the justifications for action. Many articles have their origin, I suspect, in government press releases. Next to be highlighted are situational features as they affect students and groups, including a keen awareness of the barriers facing mature students. Not surprisingly, student attitudes including motivation or volition; in other words, the 'voice' of students features least.

This section of the research has examined the influence of the three major stakeholders in the Access debate in Ireland – the state, the academic oligarchies, the customer, along with presentations of educational disadvantage from the media. From this viewpoint, the state through its policies and funding represents the most influential voice, and as seen earlier, the customer in the form of students the least, but it is interesting that the question of disadvantage has become a newsworthy press story, and continues to be so.⁶

This chapter has examined policy in relation to Access, as seen through the perspectives of three key players: the state, the academic institutions, the target group for Access, together with public debate as presented through the press. The next chapter will now turn to the implementation of Access policies through a report of a survey on Access provision in Ireland.

⁶ Recent press coverage in 2001 includes headlines such as 'Report Says 1m. Learning Poor Not Being Helped' (Oliver, 2001).

Chapter 7. A Survey of Access Provision in Ireland

In 1998 I conducted the first survey of Access provision for adults in Ireland. This was undertaken for the purposes of this research project, but with the knowledge that it would provide useful information on a national level, both for policymakers and for the higher education establishments. In fact a report of this survey was subsequently requested by the Irish Department of Enterprise and Employment. The survey was first conducted in November of that year and revised a year later in 1999 in order to capture new provision that had emerged. The intention was to provide a comprehensive picture of generic Access courses for adults in Ireland by looking at some key features of Access, such as the duration and level of such courses; the qualifications awarded, the subjects studied and the effectiveness of these courses in terms of successful student completion and progression to higher education. This chapter presents these findings.

The difficulty with establishing the current state of Access provision for adults in Ireland is the fact that activity was, and still is sparse, though increasing, and information had not up to 1999 been systematically collected. This information comes from two sources – first the previously-mentioned AMA Report (1999), compiled for the Council of Heads of the Irish Universities (CHIU), and second, from the Access survey reported in this chapter. The AMA Report does include some useful and lengthy descriptions of some courses, but tends to concentrate on Access to third level from school-leavers in disadvantaged areas.

The methodology involved the postal distribution of questionnaires to all Registrars or Access Officers in the third-level Irish institutions including the seven universities, and the fourteen institutes of technology.

Nineteen postally-distributed questionnaires were returned from twenty-four distributed, giving a response rate of seventy nine per cent. These initial questionnaires were distributed to institutions where it was known, or thought likely that they had some Access provision. Telephone follow-up calls were made to those who did not respond to the questionnaire in order to gain a complete picture from all the third-level institutions in the State.

a) Survey Data

Data, beginning with the location and provision of Access courses is presented below (Tables have been removed to Appendix 1 in order that chapters are less unwieldy in length).

7. 1. Access Providers and Location

These questionnaires provide descriptions of nineteen Access courses for adults, four of which are run by the universities, ten by the institutes of technology, one by a university/institute collaborative venture and the remainder by other educational providers, both at further and higher education levels (see Appendix 3 for a list of institutions).

With regard to course location, over half of the Access courses identified are run in the capital, Dublin; two are based in Waterford in the south-east of the country, one in Cork in southern Ireland; four in Galway and the south-west, and one in Athlone in the midlands.

7. 2. Inception of Course

It can be seen from Table 7. 2 that all courses surveyed are less than ten years old, with the exception of one course for people with disabilities which began in 1986. A quarter of all courses surveyed began in 1992, but the majority of courses have only been established within the last five years and especially within the last three.

7. 3. Mode of Course Delivery

The mode of course delivery is weighted in favour of daytime provision, whether full or part-time, with a smaller number of courses taking place in the evening. Just under half the courses offered are full-time and the remainder are part-time. The part-time Access courses mentioned are generally associated with university extra-mural provision.

7. 4. Study Time, Originating Sector and Mode of Delivery

For the purposes of analysis, the sample was divided into three categories according to the contact hours listed for courses. It can be seen that the majority of courses run for eighteen to twenty two hours per week, over what would be a normal academic year of twenty five to thirty weeks. The

shortest is a two-week pre-university course for people with a disability. The longest runs for twenty five hours per week in some weeks. The 'self-study' hours do not show much consistency, with some courses having a large number of self-study hours, and others none at all. Most of the courses are delivered in the higher education sector, with two of the 'longer' courses outside this in the further education (Post Leaving Certificate) sector.

7. 5. Typology of Participants

All of the courses surveyed are intended solely for adults, with over a half of these targeted specifically at disadvantaged adults. These figures subsume some specific aspects of disadvantage – people with a disability; those lacking basic skills or competencies, and those at risk of social exclusion, including the long-term unemployed, and women-returners. A smaller number also have a specific target group; for example, courses for women, because they were set up with the aid of EU funding, from the New Opportunities for Women (NOW) programme such as that run in the Institute of Technology, Tralee.

7. 6. Academic Level of Course and Qualification-Awarding Body

It can be seen that half of the courses surveyed are pitched at the level of the NCEA (HETAC) Certificate for Mature Students, an alternative to the traditional Irish Leaving Certificate qualification taken by school-leavers. However it is interesting to note that a quarter of the sample pitch their courses at a level above this; at first-year college or university level rather than as a pre-entry to the same. Almost a quarter claim that their courses have no academic level. With regard to the validating bodies and status of the qualification, over half of the courses award a nationally recognised qualification validated by the NCEA (HETAC), whilst more than another quarter offer a university certificate. The remainder offer no award.

7. 7. Progression and Guaranteed Places

It can be seen that only a quarter of the courses surveyed guarantee higher education places in their own institutions for successful Access course participants. The majority of institutions in this survey claim instead that completion of an Access course improves the chances of admission to

higher education. No Access qualification listed here guarantees entry to another institution.

7. 8. Number of Subjects Studied

The majority of courses surveyed offer between five and nine subjects, with one course offering sixteen options from which six subjects were chosen. The modal number of subjects offered is seven, which is consistent with the NCEA (HETAC) credit requirement of the completion of sixty credits at Level 0 for their Foundation Certificate, which works out at participants undertaking six subjects, worth ten credits per subject. Table 7. 8 reports these findings.

7. 9. Core Subjects and Electives

The division of subjects into ‘core’ subjects and ‘electives’ falls neatly into a predictable pattern. The most frequently cited core subjects from a list of twenty-seven emphasise the basic but essential higher education skills and competencies such as information technology, writing, numeracy and study skills. Under half of the courses offer no electives, but where options are offered, there is a total of twenty three subjects which people might study from interest or potential subject choice, with social and business studies, psychology and English literature as popular electives. Other electives cover a wide range of subject matter from auto-cad to religion. Table 7. 9 reports these findings.

7. 10. Examination Success Rate for Access Course Participants

Figures given for the success rates of Access course students in final examinations for the year previous to the survey, demonstrate that the pass rate is high – an average of eighty seven per cent. All of the pass rates are in the upper quartile, with no institution reporting below a seventy five pass rate. However this is excluding the numbers of those who drop out of Access courses. The figure therefore should be read as equivalent to a completion rate. Table 7.10 therefore reports the figures in relation to those who completed their Access courses.

7. 11. Attrition Rate of Access Course Participants

Table 7.11 shows the mean drop-out rate of participants from Access courses last year as eighteen per cent of those registered. However this figure should be read with caution as almost a quarter of the sample surveyed do not make any information on their attrition rates available, and some of the figures are so general and rounded that they should be read sceptically. The overall range of reported drop- out is large - from none to half the course participants. Table 7.11 reports these findings.

7. 12. Higher Education Destination of Students

A problem with the data on participants gaining higher education places is that these figures are sometimes given in percentages and sometimes in raw numbers so that a conversion had to be made where possible. However, the raw figures as well as percentages will also be used, since they give some idea of the total number of Access students who have progressed on to higher education courses in their own institutions. For example, the nine courses giving figures report two hundred and seventy two, or forty six percent of a total of five hundred and ninety seven adult Access students progressing to higher education courses in their own institutions in 1998.¹ However, for eight institutions figures are not available, either because the courses are too new or there is no tracking mechanism to follow up Access students.

If one looks at progression to higher education in other institutes then the situation is more confusing. Six institutions report a total of seventy-three students progressing to other higher education institutions – giving a figure of twelve percent. Ten institutions do not provide any figures; one gives figures for progression to further vocational training rather than higher education and two give high but perhaps unreliable figures to indicate that the majority of their students go onto third level education.

Combining the raw figures would suggest that three hundred and forty five

¹ UCAS gives the number of accepted places on full-time courses by over 21s in the UK for 2000 as 58,169, from a total of 308, 718 accepted places, giving a 19% admissions rate, which is lower than would be expected, but may reflect the drop spoken of by Thomas on p. 47.

Access students progressed to higher education in 1998 – fifty eight percent of the cohort. However extrapolating from the minority who give figures, and making the assumption that the courses who give no figures would be similar to those that did, then the numbers progressing to higher education from Access courses would be forty per cent.

7. 13. Student Support: Mentoring Systems

The majority of colleges do not use student mentoring or personal tutoring systems to support adult Access students because there is no mechanism as yet to provide this service. However a quarter do provide some form of mentoring. It is noteworthy that over half of the colleges surveyed do use a support system of one form or another, ranging from the tutor meeting the class on a regular basis, to ex-students returning to talk to Access groups. Table 7.13 reports these findings.

7. 14. Problems of Access Students

Problems identified by Access Officers as being of concern to Access students fall into four categories: those concerned with study skills and life-management strategies; those concerned with self-confidence and motivation; those concerned with financial support for studying and those concerned with a difficult subject- mathematics, statistics or economics. Table 7.14 reports in rank order the most frequently listed problems. A number of the respondents identify more than one problem. Study skills emerges as the most endemic problem, followed, not surprisingly by lack of confidence. Finance does not feature highly as a problem here.

7. 15. Funding

A new question, not asked in the previous year, relates to funding. The figures reveal a confusing picture. For example, in two cases funding is provided by an EU EMPLOYMENT initiative. Two of the courses are funded under the Irish Department of Education and Employment's VTOS programme for unemployed adults. Two university-run Access courses are funded through the HEA'S 'Targeted funding' initiative. Six institutions fund Access courses from their own college budgets; Two courses are run with the aid of private sponsorship and five courses require students to be self-

financing, with fees ranging from £195 per annum to £540 per annum.

Table 7.15 reports these figures.

b) Analysis of Findings

The section of the chapter below deals with the analysis of findings. My intention with regard to this survey is to provide a snapshot of Irish Access provision and activity at a specific moment in time, and where possible, to locate what is happening within the wider context of the international Access movement. The data in this survey is to my knowledge the only comprehensive information in existence to date on the national scene with regard to Access for adults.²

This update of the survey, carried out in November 1999, does attempt to rectify some problems which had occurred in the first version of the previous year. For example, in this update, a more thorough attempt is made to establish the comprehensiveness and reliability of the information given, through telephone interviews held after the return of the questionnaires, and a return of these questionnaires to respondents for final checking. In this survey for example, the total numbers of Access students in the country can be estimated, as shown in Table 7.12. This is, for 1999 (the year for which information was requested) at five hundred and ninety seven.

Nineteen institutions now report, as indicate in Table 7.1a that they are involved in Access provision, an increase of two from last year. There is also some anecdotal evidence of at least two other institutions in the country which have, or are on the verge of, launching Access courses. The type of institution involved, and the Access programmes described are varied, as one would expect from a comparison of the similar English experience of the formation of the Access movement (Parry, 1996, p.12). It is not surprising that the institutes of technology here are now involved in Access provision to a greater extent than the universities. There are twice the number of these institutes, and in the UK it was the polytechnics which were to the forefront of Access provision in the 1970s and 1980s (ibid., p.115) so a similar pattern is emerging here. Perhaps too these newer institutions can be more

² The HEA announced in June 2001 that they had commissioned a Mature Student Survey which would investigate the number of Access courses participants from 1999/2000.

responsive to different types of students than the universities, and they do attract more students from the lower social classes, as is the case in other countries (Skilbeck, 2000a, p.29). As stated in Chapter 1, MIT was the first to offer a nationally accredited Access course in the mid-nineties, and others have followed suit since then. However Chapter 6 argues that it was initially the universities which were more involved with Access, partly as a result of their HEA funding. Another reason for this concentration in higher education is that no further education sector existed in Ireland in the past, although we are now getting the emergence of one, drawn from the Post Leaving Certificate Colleges (PLCs) and ex-technical schools. The UK experience of collaboration between the two sectors, which is just beginning here, has so far had little impact on the national Access scene.

Within the updated sample of nineteen Access courses surveyed there are eleven generic Access courses, four in Science and Technology, two in Business/ Humanities, one in Social Science, and one in Women's Studies though two of the Science/Technology courses have women as their target group. There are also other courses operating within the country which may act as Access courses to higher education, such as 'The National Certificate in Training and Development' which is run for women activists in the community sector. However, it is difficult to identify such courses if they do not carry the term 'Access' or 'Foundation' in their titles so a decision was made not to include them since it would have made the task of data collection unwieldy, both in terms of identification and categorisation.

The location of these courses shows that Access provision is unevenly distributed throughout the country. As can be seen from Table 7.1b Dublin with its four universities, four institutes of technology and the greatest population has the preponderance of Access provision.³ This is followed by Galway/Limerick in the west of the country, Waterford in the south-east region and Cork in the south. There is only one course in the midlands, in Athlone. In 1999, none of the counties to the north or north-west of Dublin had any Access provision with the exception of one outreach course in Mayo run from the Galway/Mayo Institute of Technology, so adults living in the

³ See map in Appendix 3.

northern regions are singularly disadvantaged. However there are moves afoot to develop courses in the north-east of the country; in Dundalk, and the north-west in Letterkenny, Co Donegal. This patchiness of provision, with whole swathes of the country without any Access provision reflects the fact that this area is generally short of HE institutions. Moreover, Access courses appear to have sprung up on an ad hoc basis only, and not as the result of any planned initiative. The future for provision in the Border counties two years on, with north-south collaboration in education becoming more firmly established, could be more promising.⁴

Findings reported in Table 7. 2. show that almost all Access courses have only been established within the last ten years, and almost half within the last three years, making these courses a very recent phenomenon in Ireland. The oldest; a pre- university course run in University College Dublin for people with disabilities has been in existence for thirteen years. It is noteworthy that whereas the growth of Access courses in the early part of the decade was erratic, then this development has been more consistent over the last few years. Reasons for this are in part a 'domino' effect; partly a demand by adults themselves for Access, and partly an increasing awareness by policy-makers of the need to tackle educational disadvantage at a number of levels, including at an adult education level.

Most of the courses surveyed are run in the daytime whether in part-time or full-time mode, and as Table 7.3 shows, the majority of these require high numbers of contact and self-study hours. In relation to daytime provision, this may be seen as an advantage to adult learners in that it shows that institutions may be treating this provision seriously and providing adequate resources. This also caters well for the needs of one group – women-returns. On the other hand it appears that there are few mechanisms for Access by people who may not have the time to pursue full-time study in the day. There are few signs of flexible forms of Access to suit work-based learners and those who cannot avail of daytime courses, either because of

⁴ The Centre for Cross-Border Studies based in Armagh is now doing work in the area of educational disadvantage as their report by Morgan & McGill *'Ireland's Learning Poor: Adult Educational Disadvantage and Cross- Border Co-operation'* launched in April 2001 shows.

location, (such as rural adults) or other commitments. In the UK it is these part-time Access courses that are on the increase (Merrill, 1999, p.47).

With regard to the duration of these courses, Tables 7. 4a & b indicate that half of these approximate to the length of courses in the UK, but a minority demand contact hours and study hours in excess of the English requirement of five hundred hours per year, or the NCEA (HETAC) requirement of six hundred hours per year. Two of these are courses run in the further education sector where there is a closer approximation to the standard secondary school experience. At the other end of the spectrum are quite short courses-ranging from two weeks to two months. There is thus a considerable variety in terms of learning requirements and duration, and this will continue to be the case until there is some standardisation of Access systems and procedures.

If one considers the typology of participants then it can be seen from Table 7. 5 that a strong concern for disadvantage permeates the Access scene. Over half the courses surveyed are specifically targeted at disadvantaged adults, and another seven are targeted both at adults in general, and disadvantaged adults. However, this concern with disadvantage does not reflect state funding, since over half of the courses are 'self' or 'college' financed. A small number of courses were set up in the institutes of technology, with the aid of EU funding under the EMPLOYMENT initiative, and an equal number under the Higher Education Authority 'Targeted Funding' scheme. The European pilot projects are required to show a targeting of specific groups such as the long-term unemployed, women returners, and early school-leavers, all of whom are typical Access student constituents. It is not surprising that individual institutions are more responsive to the pressures for change and the demands of new student groups, before cautious government department budget holders.

With regard to the academic level of Access courses, they should be pitched at the level of the Leaving Certificate, or at the level of the NCEA (HETAC) Foundation Certificate for Mature Students. This is to be expected if Access is to function as the 'third route' into higher education. However, only half of the courses surveyed claim that they operate at this level, as shown by

Table 7.6. Two university courses state that their programmes are pitched at the level of first-year university study. This seems to operate against the spirit of Access, though it is the case that lecturers, often unintentionally, tend to teach at that level, as our own experience at MIT has shown. A quarter of the sample claim that their courses had ‘no academic level’ but my hypothesis here is that the question was misunderstood, and interpreted as asking whether course completion merited a formally recognised academic qualification. Where this was not the case, the response indicates that participants do not receive recognition for the level of work pursued.

If one looks next at the status of the qualification gained, Table 7. 6 also shows that half the sample award National Foundation Certificates validated by the NCEA (HETAC); a quarter are validated by the universities and the remainder have no formal qualification. This is unfortunate if Access students are to gain any progression and for their learning to have a recognised value, though it may be the case that some of these courses lacking any qualification are new ones, and therefore awaiting validation.

Table 7.7 indicates that only a quarter of the Access courses surveyed - two from institutes of technology, one university and two other institutes of higher education, offer guaranteed entry to their own institutions. However, they all make the claim that success on their Access courses improves the chances of adults applying. No Access qualification guarantees entry to another higher education institution. It remains to be seen whether the HEA or the proposed new national co-ordination office for Access will be able to persuade all institutions to guarantee entry to their own third level courses, so that successful Access students will have genuine progression opportunities.

In the courses surveyed, Table 7.8 shows that almost all require students to study between five and nine subjects, but the average is seven, which nearly accords with the NCEA (HETAC) requirement of six subjects, each worth a ten credit rating, giving a total requirement of sixty credits for the National Certificate. However one course has students studying between ten and fifteen subjects; in all likelihood as ‘taster courses’. This brings to mind the request from Scottish SWAP students for fewer subjects, and greater in-

depth knowledge, which would aid the student in being able to successfully cope with first year of higher education work (Munn et al., 1994, p.2). The rank order of subjects chosen, as reported in Table 9 follows a predictable pattern in the core subjects emphasising competencies or core skills rather than subject-specific knowledge. The exception is numeracy/mathematics which falls between two schools in being both a skill, and a subject in its own right. Electives, where offered tend to be much more variable and offer participants a chance to study subjects they would not have been acquainted with from their earlier school experience such as psychology or business studies, but which have a considerable appeal for adult students.

Success rates of Access participants in final assessments are high with no course reporting less than a seventy five per cent pass rate, as shown by Table 7.10. Where people fail, it is on the whole, because they drop -out, rather than fail to demonstrate core competencies. In the Irish context, the final assessment is more likely to be a combination of examinations and continuous assessment, rather than solely continuous assessment, as was the case with some of the Scottish SWAP programmes. This raises the question as to whether there should be a complete move to criterion-referenced assessment as more suitable for Access students demonstrating core competencies, or whether assessment should continue to be norm – referenced, as is conventional practice, certainly in Irish third level education. The NCEA in their revised Foundation Studies regulations of 1998 have removed grading from final examinations, though not from the individual subject assessments, which seems to be an uneasy compromise between two systems. However students do want to see effort, skill or excellence clearly recognised, and to be prepared for conventional examination practices in higher education.

Be that as it may, it is possible to see two kinds of explanation behind the high success rate claimed for Access courses: a) that adult students are generally highly motivated and work hard; and b) the courses are designed to instill confidence in adults and the work is pitched at a level where it is possible to succeed.

The mean drop-out rate reported in the survey is eighteen percent, though the

range is very variable, as shown by Table 7.11 and the reliability of the figures is questionable. It may be observed however that a mean figure of under twenty percent is better than the drop-out rate in Irish third-level education overall, which runs at over thirty percent (Healy et al., 1999). A number of comments that can be made about this lower figure given for Access student drop-out. First, adults are more likely to drop out of courses for personal or family reasons, so that one might expect a higher drop-out rate than for younger students. There is some evidence that only sixty per cent of Access students in the UK complete their HE studies (Hayes et al., 1997, p.20). On the other hand, they are more likely to be motivated and perhaps receive, in Access courses, greater support than available to the average Irish college student. However a third of the sample did not respond to this question, either because they found it inapplicable or perhaps it is not prudent to reveal high drop-out rates on newly established courses.

Respondents to the survey were asked for the numbers of Access participants going on to higher education in the year prior to the survey (1998/99). As the commentary to Table 7.12 explains, a difficulty was that the percentage figures and raw figures do not tally, and respondents variably utilised one or the other. In retrospect it would have been better to have requested raw figures only. However it is claimed that almost a quarter of 1998's Access students (one hundred and thirty three) went on to higher education, though the commentary on the table points out that a large number of Access participants are unaccounted for. If the figures above are accurate, this would give the percentage of Access students entering Irish higher education nationally as half of one per cent of the 1998 total entry. Compare this with Davies' 1995 claim that approximately a thousand Scottish Access students were entering higher education each year, and the number was increasing, though it is not stated how this fares as a percentage of total entrants (1995, p.246). In defence of the perhaps unreliable figures above, it should be stated that English figures are also variably reported. UCAS gives a figure of Access students as eight per cent of UK admissions, whereas statistics provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (1999) reveal a figure of four per cent of undergraduates entering British higher education institutions with Access credits. UCAS however predicts a downward trend, so that the lower and later percentage here may be more accurate. A third of the Irish

survey respondents did not reply to this question since for those with new courses it was inapplicable. There is a fairly equal division between those students progressing to higher education in their own institutions, and those going elsewhere for higher education. Having said this, there is no information available with regard to seventy per cent of Access course participants.

The issue of Access student support deserves greater attention, but the survey asked specifically only about mentoring systems. Mentoring is a comparatively new phenomenon in the Irish colleges and many would not have the resources nor trained staff to support such initiatives nor to develop peer-mentoring systems. The present situation where the majority of Irish colleges have no formal mentoring or personal tutorial systems may well change in the future, given government concern about drop-out and attrition. It is only from the year 2000 that the Irish Department of Education and Science has been prepared to fund Access Officers in the institute of technology sector, though the universities, in receipt of Higher Education Authority 'Targeted Funding' have had these for about three years. Data from the survey, as shown in Table 7.13 would suggest that support systems presently operate on a good-will rather than any formal basis. For example, the mentoring in the one work-based Access programme surveyed was not successful because volunteer mentors were not adequately trained in the assistance they could give to the course participants.

Student problems for those on Access courses are no different from those which might be reported by traditional students – a lack of life-management, personal and study skills, followed subject problems especially with mathematics. Finance did not feature prominently, but perhaps this is because over half the courses surveyed are presently in receipt of special funding, with student allowances. That apart, Irish adults are used to paying heavily for education, and to the lack of adequate state assistance, though there are moves afoot to increase the maintenance grant for low income and disadvantaged groups.⁵

⁵ The highest rate of Maintenance Grant, for which 7000 students qualify was increased to Ir£3000 per year from Autumn, 2001.

It is useful in relation to student problems to adapt Fleming's (1999) distinction between 'Access' and 'accessibility' to draw a distinction between mechanisms used to promote entrance to higher education as Access, and the experience of students once they arrive, as 'accessibility'. Referring to 'accessibility' he makes the claim that higher education is accessible to men and women in different ways, citing such factors as childcare, the strain on relationships when one partner goes to college (developmental envy); their identity as learners.

'Institutional' factors did not rank highly as causing problems for students, but neither students or co-ordinators may be aware of the extent to which these factors relating to the institution either help or hinder Access. Comments from the course co-ordinators included those on the necessity for a national streamlining of application and selection procedures; curricular issues such as the need for a greater variety of assessment strategies, and the need for higher education institutions to adapt to Access students.

A final question added to this updated survey was one on funding and the picture here, as represented in Table 7.15, is as I stated confusing and inchoate, but one with which the Irish Dept of Education and Science is just beginning to grapple. To summarise, the main issues to emerge from the findings of this survey may be categorized under headings ranging from national Access development and location to those relating to student problems and student support.

First this is a snapshot of Access activity at a time of rapid growth of the phenomenon, so it should not be surprising that there should be questions about the consistency of the information provided.⁶ However, the total number of adult Access students overall is still small and some parts of the country completely lack any Access provision, though this situation is changing.⁷ Record-keeping, tracking and information on progression and drop-out still appears to be sporadic, and perhaps sensitive for the individual

⁶ The situation now three years in 2002 later is much more coherent, with Access Officers and courses in all the higher education institutes now funded by the Dept. of Education and Science, and with standardising and quality bodies on the horizon.

⁷ The Distance Education providers cannot on the whole fulfil this role.

institutions. It is possible to see the emergence of some trends however. For example, the institutes of technology are becoming more involved in Access as happened with the newer post 1992 universities in the UK, but the collaboration between the further and higher education sectors has not yet taken place for reasons that have been given. However the National Qualifications Authority, set up in 1999 is interested in the question of flexibility of provision, and the articulation between validating and qualification awarding bodies (NQA, 2002), so this should encourage such collaboration. A national body, as in the UK, is also required to provide some standardisation of Access programmes in terms of length, consistency of the student learning experience and the quality of the award, whilst mindful of the need for flexibility and variety in Access provision. Findings in this chapter show much confusion about the purpose and practices of Access programmes. Progression is still a thorny problem since there is no guaranteed entry to higher education from Access programmes, and no use yet of Access compacts or agreements.

Issues such as the nature and extent of student support and student attrition also feature in these findings and show a similar picture to those of students elsewhere, though with the proviso that learning centres or mentoring schemes are very new phenomena in Ireland, and there is at any rate, a high student drop out from higher education. There is clearly a need for proper counselling and advice for Access students.

On a more positive note, the material from this survey, and further work have formed the basis of a database on Access provision, and will also form, as stated previously, part of a report for the Irish Department of Enterprise and Employment.

This chapter has examined the situation with regard to Access course provision in Ireland. Following this, the next chapter will look at the outcomes from Access provision for one group of students from one third-level institution, and at the outcomes within this institution, for four Access, or ex-Access students.

Chapter 8. Access Outcomes: a Case Study

For this chapter, I intend to examine the effectiveness of Access provision, though on a micro scale. This will be achieved through looking at the outcomes for Access graduates in MIT; from the first cohort who graduated from their Access studies in 1997 to those Access students who graduated in 2000. It will also include four 'snapshots' of Access students from these courses in order to provide a 'thick description' of typical Access students and issues (Schofield, 1993, p.99).

The initial aim therefore is to analyse the results of some initial tracking of one group of Access students. It would have been useful for this research had this tracking been able to take place over a longer time period, or at least until the first group of Access Foundation students had graduated with first degrees. This did not take place until October 2001, which was too late for this investigation. However, my contention is that this small group of over sixty students tracked is similar in characteristics to cohorts of Access students elsewhere. All were adults, some of whom were individually motivated to return to study; the remainder from specific groups. These groups were composed of those in socially excluded categories, and a 'work-based' Access group. These Access groups had a preponderance of females over males, with members possessing few educational qualifications, but having some recent experience of adult education and other social activity (Benn, 1996, p.168 and Hedoux, 1982, p.170).

The methodology for the collection and analysis of outcome data was discussed in general terms in Chapter 2, and more detail is provided here. Four groups of Access students who had taken the NCEA 'National Certificate in Foundation Studies for Mature Students' in MIT were contacted in July 2000, and asked to complete a postal survey (see Appendix 2). This asked what they were doing at the present time, courses taken, awards gained, future intentions, and what they considered in retrospect the benefits and disadvantages of the Foundation Course. The total number of students from these groups was sixty-eight. Following the postal survey, Access students, together with their course leaders and tutors were invited to a meeting at a local hotel where they were divided into focus

groups, facilitated by course leaders and tutors, and asked to reflect on their experience of the Access course. The facilitators were given a number of open-ended questions (see Appendix 5) then asked to provide a summary of comments.

(As in Chapter 7, tables have been removed to Appendix 4 in the interests of conciseness.)

a) Survey Data

8.1a Numbers on Access Courses

A key characteristic of the students is that they were all over twenty-three years of age. The first cohort for whom an Access course was set up in 1996 in Midshire were disadvantaged adults. This course was funded from the EU EMPLOYMENT programme and the target group was selected as conforming to specific criteria related to social exclusion (Jordan, 1997a, p.188). The group participated in a year-long nationally validated Foundation Course in Business/Humanities or Science Technology, and successful individuals gained a 'National Certificate in Foundation Studies for Mature Students', entitling them to apply to the college or any other third-level Irish institution for full-time national certificates, diplomas or degrees.

MIT did not run the National Certificate in Foundation Studies Course in the year 1997–98, but it resumed in the academic year 1998–99, and has run since then. In the year 1998–99, two versions of the Foundation Course were run. One was the standard Access course, open to all adults over the age of twenty-three not possessing the Leaving Certificate. The second version, funded by the EU Leonardo programme, was run specifically for the employees of one manufacturing company. The final group surveyed were once again standard adult Access students. Table 8.1. reports the student numbers in the different Access groups surveyed.

8. 2a Attrition Figures

Two of the four Access courses surveyed had no drop-outs. Half of the 'drop-outs' cite educational reasons for non-completion; the remainder

dropped out due to personal or family reasons, with childcare featuring as a reason in both groups. Table 8. 2. reports these findings.

8. 3a Current Situation of Access Graduates

If we look at the current situation of Access course graduates from 1996 onwards, it can be seen that just over half of them are still engaged in further study. The third of those in employment is however misleading in that it might be read as these students gaining employment as a result of their Access studies. In fact twelve were from the work-based Access course. The small percentage of those seeking employment – nine percent - indicates that the majority are still in the process of completing their studies and are not yet at the point of looking for work. Table 8.3. presents these figures.

8. 4a Educational Destination of Access Graduates

It is not surprising that the majority of Access graduates – eighty three per cent have chosen to pursue their studies in the same establishment, and in their own locality. Those availing of education provision elsewhere have stayed within the region. One person is undertaking a distance education course. Table 8. 4. reports these findings.

8. 5a Awards Received by Access Graduates

It is uncommon for the institutes of technology to offer *ab initio* degrees. Instead students generally opt for two-year National Certificate or three-year National Diploma courses. Most subjects then will have a fourth year add-on degree for which students qualify by attaining a merit in their diplomas, or by repeating the final diploma year. The finding that under a quarter of Access students engaged in further study have already received a National Certificate or Diploma reflects the fact that the first Access students from the 96-97 cohort have now attained the National Diploma level. Those students in the subsequent Access years could by the time of this survey have only have gained a National Certificate. Table 8. 5 reports these findings.

8. 6a Reasons For Not Engaging in Further Study

From those Access students not engaged in further study who give reasons for not participating, it can be seen that the predominant factor cited by

under half of the respondents is external, such as the family situation, or illness. It is surprising that 'finance' does not rank higher, though it may also be a factor if anecdotal evidence is anything to go by. 'Internal' reasons are cited by under a third of respondents who refer to a difficulty with subjects studied; assessments; an unwelcoming student environment and the difficulty of integration into college life as an adult student. Table 8.6 reports these findings.

8. 7a Intention to Resume Study

More than half of those Access students not engaged in further study claim that they intend to resume their studies at a further date. A much smaller proportion state they have no intention of studying again. Table 8.7. reports the findings.

8. 8a Subjects Identified for Further Study

When those not at present studying but who state their future intention to do so, are asked what they wish to study, the majority cite 'job-related' subjects such as business, or social work. A number identify pure academic subjects not offered by MIT, with a small remainder stressing personal development type subjects. Table 8.8. reports these findings.

8. 9a Employment Gained by Access Graduates

It is difficult to identify a pattern emerging in the range of employments given under 'Current Employment' in Table 8.9. It certainly shows an unexpected diversity, showing that it is difficult to pigeon-hole Access participants or their destinations. The jobs listed under the 'Work-based Learners' are typical of the range of employments in a specific industry.

8. 10a Relevance of Access Studies to Employment

Few of the respondents in employment see their Access studies as 'essential' for their employment. However, under half see the course as 'relevant'. Evidence from the data collected would suggest that business studies, information technology and psychology are those which are perceived as useful. Table 8. 10 reports these findings.

8. 11a Benefits of Access Studies

It is obvious that the primary benefit to students of Access studies is in providing opportunities for adults to return to education, since this is the primary aim of such courses. It is also understandable that personal skills and qualities gained, including increased motivation and an increase in confidence should rank highly, as Table 8. 11. shows. Analysis of the data indicates that these are the highest ranked frequencies. However in order to categorise these benefits they have been divided into four types, a) opportunities, b) personal benefits, c) subject benefits and d) course environment benefits. When the data is examined in this way it can be seen that 'personal benefits' are ranked foremost, followed by 'subject benefits', with (educational) opportunities and course 'environment' benefits coming last.

8. 12a Disadvantages of the Access Course

In terms of rank order, the observations that the subjects taught on the Access course are too basic, and that students are mollycoddled stand out. When the same categorisation is used as that to identify the benefits of the Access course, then criticisms of the 'course environment' include the fact that Access students are not a homogenous group in terms of teaching strategies; that the course is too intense; that some lecturers are not sure about the best way to deal with adults. Table 8.12. reports these findings.

8. 13a Recommendations for Access courses

The majority of recommendations made by students in relation to the MIT Access courses, relate, as one might expect, to the college and to the course environment. Repeated recommendations include the need to run the course over a longer time period (this came particularly from members of the work-based Access group who found it very difficult to manage classes and complex shift patterns); and the necessity for mentors. Next come comments relating to specific subjects taught, particularly referring to the need for more computing, and an improvement in study skills, especially the writing of essays. Other comments relate to better science provision, the need for more practical laboratory work and more help with mathematics. In relation to recommendations on 'opportunities', students point out the need to increase the number of adults in the colleges; to provide more co-ordination

and information on progression and to provide more job-relevant subjects.

Table 8. 13. reports these findings.

In addition to the postal survey four focus groups were set up, corresponding to the four groups of students who had undertaken the Access course from 1996 to 1999. Each of the groups was led by a course tutor who knew the individuals in the group. These course tutors asked a number of open-ended questions, devised to ascertain group views on the relevance of the course content; the assessment strategies used; teaching styles employed; levels of student support; funding; the potential of the course for personal development, (soft skills) and the quality of guidance and recommendations (see Appendix 5). The coding ABCD refers to the Access student year group e.g. 1996 is A, 1998a is B, 1998b is C and 1999 is D.

b) Focus Group Data

Question 8.1b Relevance of Course Content

All four groups are clear that the courses provide a good preparation for further study though Group D thought more needed to be done on linking the Foundation course with mainstream college courses. The awareness of the preparatory function of the course correlates with the findings from the postal survey where a quarter of the sample surveyed think that the Access courses provide a good preparation for third-level study; a factor which ranks third in course benefits.

The reference in Table 8. 14. to a trip to Spain by Group A -the first Access group- concerns a subsidised trip they made to Toledo in Spain, courtesy of the EU EMPLOYMENT programme. For the majority this was their first trip abroad and so remains very memorable, and an important aspect of their educational experience. The reference to the 'company' was by Group C, the work-based student group which had been strongly directed by their employer to sign up for the Foundation Course, but who now query the Access course usefulness in terms of promotion or job-related skills. The reference to 'mathematics' is one that also runs through most of the individual surveys. Much depends on mastering this subject for progression, especially in Science and Technology Access course. For example, those who dropped out of mainstream computing multi-media courses did so because they found the mathematics too difficult. Findings are set out in Table 8. 14.

Question 8. 2b Assessment Strategies Used on the Access Courses

Students in the postal survey were not specifically asked about assessment or feedback, but the issue arose several times in their responses to the postal survey, so it seemed appropriate to include this question for the focus groups. The message that comes across clearly from all groups is of the importance and timeliness of constant feed-back, and the means by which this should be provided - by short and frequent non-threatening tests. The reference to examinations by Group D. shows their importance as a formative learning mechanism. Table 8. 15. presents these findings.

Question 8. 3b Teaching styles on Access Courses

Some important points emerge from the question about teaching styles – an awareness of a lack of course structure and planning from Group A; the importance of fostering independent learning and more flexibility from the other groups. Teachers on these Access courses were not generally full-time staff, but often less experienced part-time staff, which might account for the comments on a lack of structure and one inappropriate authoritarian style of teaching noted by Group C. Table 8. 16 presents these findings.

Question 8. 4b Student Support for Access Students

The main issue to be highlighted concerns mentors /personal tutors. For Group A. mentors were provided and paid for out of EU monies, and time was allocated for individual and group counselling. Evidence from students suggests that mentors were very welcome, even by those who did not use them. It is revealing that there were no drop-outs from this course (compare with Group D which lost almost a third of their members, and did not have mentors). The situation referred to by Group C, the work-based learners, is that their employer promised volunteer mentors from the company, and these were initially recruited. However, the reality was that this system failed to take off, due to its 'volunteer' nature, and was in effect abandoned. Some students did feel aggrieved about this. Table 8. 17. presents these findings.

Question 8. 5b Finance

Three of the groups raise the issue of finance. For example, there is in Ireland a 'Back to Education Allowance' for unemployed adults who take up formal education programmes. In 1996 however this was difficult to obtain,

with Social Welfare staff themselves often not aware of the way the system worked, and in a number of instances denying claimants their rightful allowance, so that this had to be fought for. The reference in group C to the company not being able to support the work-based Access programme for a second run is a reference to the way that the course played havoc with the company's shift system and needs to be delivered in some more flexible form – perhaps partly through a self-learning format. Table 8. 18. below reports these findings.

Question 8. 6b The Personal Development Potential of Access Courses

Findings here, as shown in Table 8.19., and the repeated reference by all groups to the role of the Access course in building confidence correlates clearly with what students say in the surveys about a major benefit of the Access courses.

Question 8. 7b Information on Educational Progression

An element of dissatisfaction is obvious here from two of the groups. It is felt that subject lecturers should know more about the progression possibilities in their subject. Educational (and vocational) guidance is clearly a key element of Access. Table 8. 20. reports these findings.

Question 8. 8b Recommendations

Three groups have the same view - the importance of creating a coherent link between Access and mainstream college courses, staff and students. This also arises in the postal survey recommendations where it takes mid place in a list of thirty-nine suggestions. Table 8. 21. presents these findings.

c) Analysis of Findings

The students were all over twenty three years of age, though groups such as the Access Made Available group of university Access officers (O'Byrne et al., 2000) are campaigning for this to be altered to twenty one, to fit with the criteria of 'adult' used in VTOS courses. Two cohorts were comprised of specific target groups recruited for Access courses established through EU funding, showing the importance of the European Union at this time in widening participation and tackling educational disadvantage. It is noteworthy that in the 1990's EU criteria focuses on specific disadvantaged

groups, thereby pursuing the 'equity agenda' considered by Skilbeck to be the key rationale for Access provision (Skilbeck & Connell, 2000a, p.14), though, as Field (1998, p186) claims, also because of a perceived crisis in global competitiveness. The other two Access courses were more individualistic in orientation and therefore more diverse. It is unlikely that MIT would initially have run these courses on their own initiative, since it was not until 1998 that the Irish Department of Education and Science provided any funding for this activity. Since that date they have been nationally funded, showing the process of the 'institutionalisation' of Access in Ireland.

No student failed the Access course if they managed to stay the distance, as was pointed out in the previous chapter. It is noteworthy that the two EU-funded Access courses had no drop-outs. Mentoring and formal student feedback was a feature of the EU courses, and was clearly successful in terms of retention. Both these courses then were subject to ongoing monitoring and constant scrutiny, in comparison to the two 'standard' Access courses which lost between twenty and thirty per cent of their members. If this seems high it needs to be put into the context of a first year drop-out rate of thirty seven per cent in the institute of technology sector mentioned earlier (Healy et al., 1999, p.2).

Over half of the former Access students are still engaged in further study, demonstrating the benefit of Access courses in providing opportunities and incentives for adults. These adults also have been 'sensitised' to adult education and now have an awareness of its role and its value for them in the future. A clear view of the 'preparatory function' of Access courses arises both in the focus groups and in the postal survey. The exception here is the work-based group. These have not pursued further study, but it is perhaps expecting too much that those in lucrative employment give this up to engage in study leading to uncertain outcomes. Some US research claims that adults engage in study for instrumental reasons such as employment or better employment prospects (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980), and one complaint of this group is that successful completion of the course has not led them to advancement within the company, particularly since the company targeted these individuals. There is thus no solid benefit for them

(McGivney, 1992, p.63). There should now be greater support for work-based learners, given the government's commitment to this group in the White Paper on Adult Education (Ir. Department of Education and Science, 2000b, p.79), and for recognising learning undertaken in the workplace itself.

The majority of Access graduates have chosen to continue their studies in their region, and at the institution where they began their Access studies. This confirms findings from the research which demonstrates the importance of adult students being able to find educational provision locally, within their reach (Morrison, 1996, p.216).

In relation to the future choice of subjects for study, the majority opted for vocational-type subjects such as computing or business studies. The interest in 'job-related' subjects links to the instrumental reason for studying which was noted earlier (ibid.) in relation to the work-based group. Employment is not the primary objective of Access courses, certainly in Ireland, since Access is generally part of a progression route to further or higher education, though leading in the long run to the labour market. The other point to note is the applied nature of courses studied, since the institute of technology sector does not on the whole deal with pure academic studies, the mission of the sector being to respond to regional and national economic priorities. Ladders of progression are an important element in enabling students to acquire nationally-recognised qualifications at different levels from certificate to post-graduate qualifications.

The major factor cited by approximately half of the respondents who had not continued with further study after the Access programme was external such as family circumstances or illness. External features can be seen as the equivalent to the 'situational' category of barriers to participation identified by Cross (1980), and these factors have been spelled out in detail by other researchers such as Lynch (1997, pp.98-103) as major barriers to participation for adult students. Martina's story, told later in the chapter is a good example of these external 'situational' factors.

The reference to 'internal' reasons related to the course or their progress on

it, cited by under a third of the respondents who have not continued with further study after the Access programme, is predictable. Successful students are those who can negotiate their way through the college environment and requirements, and the converse is true. However, half of those Access students not engaged in further study have the intention of resuming their studies at a further date. Research on 'hard-to-reach' groups in Ireland has shown that exposure to one course of study is a good predictor of further study and awakens people to its possibilities and opportunities (Ronayne, 1999a, p.108). This is hopefully the case here. Of interest too is the fact that a small number of respondents have no intention of resuming study. I should like to know why this is the case but this investigation is beyond the scope of this research.

Few of the respondents in employment saw their Access studies as 'essential' for their employment, which is what one might expect since these Access courses are generic, and the qualification is not overtly vocational. This is different to the UK where half of all Access courses have a vocational orientation (See Ch.5). However, under half of the respondents saw the Access course as 'relevant', possibly because they acquired literacy, numeracy and information technology skills during their year of study.

It has been claimed that the process of adult learning develops a sense of questioning that is an important element of self-assertion, and indeed of active citizenship (Fryer, 2000, p.6). The significance emerging from examining the benefits of Access study is the emphasis placed by respondents on 'soft' outcomes, and fits perhaps with the views of adult educators such as Mezirow (Beder, 1989, pp.47-48), who writes about the 'transformatory' nature of adult education on people's lives. It is significant that the phrase used by a number of the respondents was that the course "changed their lives".

There were a number of criticisms of the course environment in the listing of the disadvantages of Access courses. The comments were quite diverse but more specific and pointed than was the case with the benefits noted. They related to the subjects and levels of subjects taught, the diversity of the groups, the physical isolation of one course from the mainstream college

campus, or the fact that one group had no access to computers. There were few criticisms of the de-motivating elements of Access courses, but this is not surprising since they may not be recognised as such. Herzberg (1990, p.51) in his 'Two-Factor Theory of Motivation' found that it is not the case that the same factors motivate and de-motivate. He found that 'environmental' factors are the ones that cause the most criticism and lead to de-motivation. Motivation on the other hand is related to internal factors such as self-belief, or wanting to achieve. The moral here is that the environmental factors need to be addressed, but there should also be a *concentration on the dispositional factors which motivate. These are the least visible, but most important.*

The focus groups approved of examinations as an element of the Access courses, bearing out some Scottish research which shows that students welcome this type of assessment as part of the preparation for mainstream academic life (Munn et al, 1994, p.2). This is in contrast to findings from some other types of Access course, for example, community Access courses where participants are strongly in favour of continuous assessment and opposed to examinations (O'Grady, 2001). The importance of becoming accustomed to examinations is discussed in relation to the story of Martina, one of the Access students from Group B.

Another point to emerge relates to the importance of treating adult students in a way that is consistent with the principles of adult learning (Knowles, 1984, pp.82-98). Most Access students did feel that they had been treated as adults, rather than as children with little knowledge or few powers of decision-making. Where this was not the case, with one tutor in particular, it was highlighted by a number of students of that year, showing its importance. It was also raised by Joan, one of the Access students in Group D. whose experience is narrated below. In 1996, the year I was involved with the course, workshops were held on the Principles of Adult Learning, and tutors were paid to attend. However, it was not possible to make these mandatory, and few third level teachers in Ireland yet have training in the principles of andragogy (ibid.).¹

¹ A postgraduate qualification for third-level teachers is currently being devised by WIT.

There was comment both from the postal survey, and from all focus groups on the provision of mentors or personal tutors. These are not provided for mainstream students, though I have been lobbying for them to be.² The first Access group found that even when mentors were not used by individuals, their value was still recognised. In MIT, we did attempt to 'train the trainers' both about their 'expanded' role as lecturers but also about their academic counselling role and this training has continued, but on a voluntary basis.

Finance has been regarded as one of the greatest stumbling blocks to participation in Access programmes (Lynch, 1997, p.101), and I have already expressed my surprise that it does not rank more highly in these surveys. However it is clearly raised as an issue by Anthony, one of the Access students whose story is told below. The Maintenance Grant paid to adult students (as indeed to other students) is inadequate, though this situation has recently changed as a result of the recommendations of the Macnamara Report (2001, p.96).

With regard to the call for more information and guidance on progression routes, this was the reason for my application in 1998 for European funding to set up an educational guidance service for adults. There is no point in devising Access provision, unless progression routes and guidance are available, especially for those from socially excluded groups who are distanced from information and role models in education (Hedoux, 1982). This service (REGSA) is still running (Jordan, 1999b), and students from the 1999 course would have been able to avail of it, though it was still then in its very early days and structures not clearly established. REGSA now works intensively with Access students. In 2000 MIT developed both a drop-in Access Centre to promote self and independent learning, and a centre to promote institution-wide policies in Access and retention. (CHART).

The call for a seamless interface between Access and mainstream provision for Access students and staff also arose from both surveys. Moreover it

² Personal tutors were provided in the UK university system (see Wheeler & Birtle, 1992) but it is claimed that this tutorial system has become much diminished and squeezed out by time constraints (Tait 2002).

mirrors on a micro-level the requirement for coherence and integration across the educational systems - both vertical and horizontal, at a macro-level. We in MIT had attempted to forge a close link between the course and mainstream third-level provision with Group A. but I am unsure to what extent this happened with subsequent courses in which I was not involved – perhaps not.

This concludes the key findings from the student survey and focus groups. The next section provides four vignettes of Access students, two male and two female in order to show how the personal experience and voices of students themselves,³ contribute to an understanding of the Access experience as it impacts on participants.

These vignettes will begin with the two women who had agreed to talk about their experiences. Informal interviews, conducted by the researcher and lasting about forty-five minutes, were held with both students in the summer of 2001, with one taking place in the student's home, and the other in MIT. In the age range from thirty-eight to fifty-nine, both are in the category of older students. Access students tend to be female, (Benn, 1996, p.166) and both the women interviewed also fall into the category of older women who are returning to studies once their children are beyond the dependency stage (Steedman & Green, 1996, p.13).

Martina, aged fifty-nine, is from the 1998-1999 Access group (group B) studying in the Business /Humanities stream. She successfully completed the Access course, graduating in 1999 and went on to a full-time National Certificate in Business Studies course in MIT. She dropped out of this latter in April 2001.

Martina lives comfortably in the suburbs of Midshire and is married with four grown children in the age range eighteen to thirty. She comes from a farming/ small business background in County Mayo and took her Leaving Certificate in the late 1950s (in an age when most people left school at fifteen or sixteen). She wished to become a nun, influenced by the Mercy

³ Apart from the final vignette, that of Liam where the information was provided by myself, in my capacity as ex-Access course leader.

nuns at the convent school she attended. However, her father sent her to America (a common practice for Irish country people then) and whilst there she attended night classes and developed some skills in typing and secretarial work. She had settled into a pattern of work and college, when her father became sick and she returned to Ireland. She married in 1969 and moved down to Midshire where her husband had a job with Fás, the state training agency, and began to raise a family.

Martina has always regretted not getting a third level education, and she is the only one of her siblings not to do so. Throughout her years at home she has attended various evening courses, mainly in leisure, personal development type subjects; - in assertiveness, stress management and yoga. Her great love however is mathematics and she has always had a dream of teaching the subject at secondary school level. However, it was not until her youngest child was approaching her final school examinations that she felt free to pursue her own education on a full-time basis.

She found the Access course in MIT a stressful experience. She had little experience of note-taking or essay-writing skills, and found it painfully difficult to master these, in spite of taught sessions on these topics. She found that while some tutors, including the male course leader were very sympathetic to adult students, others were not, and treated herself and her colleagues like school-children. Her own bugbear was examinations. She found the whole ambience of the examination environment unnerving, particularly interruptions by students. She sees this lack of concentration as a serious problem, "I almost went off my head" and one she has not resolved.

However, Martina passed the Access course, went on to the National Certificate in Business Studies course in Autumn 1999, but found it difficult to compete with younger members of the class, especially in subjects such as economics. She claims that younger students are much quicker to catch on to ideas and to complete assignments. In the Spring term 2000, Martina's ninety two year old mother came down from Mayo to recuperate after suffering a stroke. Martina struggled on with the course for a while but after a short time she found the conflict of interests too great, and dropped out

without informing the Business Studies Course Leader or the Access Course Leader.

“I felt I had let him down so I didn’t contact him. Anyway, you only have your mother once”.

She has not returned to her studies, though her mother is back in Mayo. The desire to complete the course is still there, though perhaps she is now more ambivalent, being nervous, both of the intellectual demands of the course, and of the pressures of time. After the interview with me however, she was motivated to see the Access course leader, and explain her situation; it was important for her to do this, irrespective of her future intentions.

This story may be read variously as a success or failure story, though Martina presents it as the latter. However, she has successfully completed the Access course. She also knows that someone in the institute is interested in her and will encourage her to continue. There are though a number of issues that arise for Martina, some of which she is aware, others not.

Firstly, Martina falls into the group of women-returners who pursue education when their children’s needs have been attended to, but who may be now approaching another serious dependency crisis– that of caring for an elderly family member. Thus the time frame in which this group has the opportunity to pursue further studies is more constrained than it might appear. Also, whilst institutions might provide crèche facilities, there is in my experience nothing available for carers (Lane, 2001, 5.6). If there were some more flexible mechanism for delivering the course, such as online learning, these situational and institutional barriers could be overcome, especially since Martina is computer-literate and possesses a computer (a facility not generally available to disadvantaged participants).

Martina’s motivation for studying is typical of those who are seeking some ‘compensation’ for opportunities missed at an earlier stage of their lives, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this study. They seek this ‘compensation’ primarily for personal development as much as job-related purposes, though Martina still carries the thoughts of teaching as an aspiration.

An interesting comparison, of which Martina is strongly aware, is her academic performance, as measured against younger students. If there were more older students on her course then the differential performance would not be so obvious, and Martina's confidence would not be so dented. The earlier part of this chapter shows the priority Access students place on confidence-building, and this is at the heart of Martina's problem now.

Moreover, withdrawal from a course, even temporarily, seems like a failure, hence Martina's reluctance to notify the Access course leader who maintains a close interest in his ex-Access students. The concept of course withdrawal should not be presented as an irrevocable one however, in spite of the administrative implications. I begin to sense that there is a recognition that 'drop-out' may not be entirely negative, and should not be presented as such, if future students move in and out of learning opportunities. It is recognised from the UK that a greater proportion of Access students than conventional students drop out of third level study (Molloy & Carroll, 1992, p.31). Martina had choices to make, and she chose to attend to her mother; she should be facilitated to return to education if she also chooses this.

Joan, the second ex-Access student, is a younger woman in her late thirties with two children aged five and ten, also living in the suburbs of Midshire. She spent a year in MRTC (Midshire Regional Technical College) doing a Secretarial and Typing course in the 1980's after she left school. She then joined the Irish Civil Service where she worked for four years before going to the US in 1985. When she came home she married and moved to Belfast where her husband was studying on a Ship's Navigator course at the University of Ulster. After this, and a spell in Australia, she came to Midshire working in administration in local industry. She has taken a number of courses, including a 'Start Your Own Business' course and a course in teaching computing skills. By 1997 she was teaching office procedures on part-time Fás courses. She enrolled for an Access course in MIT in Autumn 1999, graduating last year in 2000 (Group D). Since then she has continued teaching, and by Summer 2001 was teaching information technology on summer school courses for adults in MIT, and for a Community Development course run from the MIT Adult Education Department.

Her personal experience on the Access course was a positive one, and she found the subjects and assessments easy. She was for my purposes, a useful observer of events and issues. For instance, her perception was that of a 'huge' drop out rate – fifty to sixty per cent in her Access year, though Table 2 (Appendix 2) shows it to be six people – a thirty per cent attrition rate. Perhaps 'drop-out' in a small group impacts more strongly on the group itself than on statisticians. The course was also at that time held in an annexe away from the main institute, with no heating and few facilities such as computers; the latter listed as one of the main recommendations in Table 13. She points out the difficulties in teaching people with very differing mathematical abilities, which suggests that different teaching methods should be explored so that individual needs can be catered for. She claims that the information technology module was a disaster, seriously undermining people's confidence with this subject, but leading her to begin teaching computing skills to her colleagues at their request. Her long-term ambition is for a full-time post teaching computing skills to adults, particularly to those who are terrified of the technology. She also points out the need for better educational and career guidance –

“some people just don't know the system and the course should have done this for them”.

Joan's is clearly a success story – from student to teacher in one year, but it does raise the question of whether she is an appropriate or indeed typical Access student. She had gained both the Leaving Certificate, and a third – level qualification, and the Access course is intended to replicate the former. I would claim that she is more typical than might appear in her 'investment' in educational capital (Schuller, 1998). In reply to why she chose this course, she saw it as an opportunity to update her general education in preparation for more advanced study. In the absence of any other opportunity it functioned reasonably well in this regard, though she must have found the course frustratingly easy at times, particularly the information technology element. However her experience will be valuable to her if as is likely, she herself teaches on the Access course in the future.

Other issues she raises highlight the importance of situating Access courses

within mainstream provision. - vulnerable and inexperienced students will hardly learn to negotiate college procedures and practices if they are isolated from these. Joan also highlights other issues raised both by respondents to the questionnaire and focus group D. – the inadequate teaching in one module from a young male teacher without any training in the teaching of adults; the way that peer teaching can be a very valuable learning tool; the importance of better guidance.

Looking at the two narratives together, it is possible to clearly identify the reasons for Joan's easy passage to date, versus Martina's problems. Both women are typical of women-returners (the median age for women in Joan's Access group was forty plus) but Martina has moved into a new caring role, whereas Joan is entering into a period of greater family freedom. Both women had completed secondary education but Joan has more recent experience of education at third-level, and good information technology skills. Martina is more affected by younger students and college procedures, whereas Joan can be a reflective participant observer. This is in spite of the fact that Martina's year group had some advantages that Joan's did not possess – a very dedicated course leader who happily took on student mentoring and counselling roles, whereas Joan's group was left to sink or swim. Martina's group was also better integrated into the main campus whereas Joan's was not.

The two male Access students were both participants in the first EU-funded Access group of 1996 (A) though one was taking the Science/Technology option, whilst the other was taking Business/ Humanities. Both men, in the age range thirty-two to forty-five, were older than the average mature student, though younger than the female participants described above. This apart, their experiences of the Access course were quite different.

To begin with Anthony,⁴ the younger of the two students. He is severely physically disabled with muscular dystrophy, is confined to a wheelchair and needs a helper to take notes for him, and to transport him from place to

⁴ The names of the other students are pseudonyms, but not so with Anthony who wrote a article about his experiences on the Access course, utilised here (O'Dea, 1997, p.18).

place. It is unlikely that Anthony will ever be able to hold down full-time work, given the nature of his disability and the way that the workplace is structured, though he is extremely mentally active and alert.

Prior to the Access course he had studied for two computing courses through correspondence tuition, but felt that he needed,

“the challenge of a third- level college course to prevent the 'feeling sorry for myself' syndrome from consuming me”(O'Dea, 1997, p.18).

On researching the course however, he found that the first handicap was financial .The course allowed participants to keep all their Social Welfare benefits but for Anthony this meant his giving up a Fás Community Employment Scheme wage, and dropping back to Disability Allowance; a drop of £30 a week. He found it very disappointing that measures intended to facilitate participants were in his case acting against his pursuing further study. His perception here bears out my own frustrating experience, as Course Administrator of trying on behalf of students, to negotiate the labyrinth of different regulations from different government departments, with the frequent lack of co-ordination between them, a point also noted by a writer on disability issues (Bloor, 1996, p.35).

After some weeks of tossing the options back and forwards, Anthony decided to take the plunge in favour of the Access course, reasoning that it would at any rate be his last year on the Community Scheme, so he would be back on Disability Allowance in a year's time anyhow. Once on the course, he was provided by another agency, 'The Centre for Independent Living', with a helper/driver and was able to avail of a scheme for disabled students to provide him with a home computer enabling him to update an old machine. His next major problem concerned physical access to the college facilities, and manoeuvrability in general. Back in 1996, wheel chair users had to negotiate numerous sets of doors in order to access a suitable lift to classrooms etc. and some facilities such as the student bar were

simply out of bounds. Improvements to access have occurred since then, but it was certainly an ordeal for Anthony and his helper to get from place to place, with simple classroom changes posing major logistical problems.

Anthony gained a Distinction in the final assessments, and went on in the following years to the National Certificate, Diploma and Degree in Computing, graduating with his degree in October 2001. He has always been keen to avoid being stereotyped as 'the disabled student' and did not look for special treatment, though given the nature of his disability he did need special conditions and facilities to enable him to cope with examinations. In the absence of any disability he would have sailed through college as a high-flying student. The problem, (now hopefully in the past), lies with institutions which are not on the whole equipped to cope with physical disability, and are therefore daunted by disabled students, rather than seeing them simply as students who have some special requirements. It is not clear what Anthony's future plans are but in one sense it does not matter; the Access course provided him with progression opportunities and he has clearly proved that he can rise to the challenge he set himself.

Liam, the final Access student whose experience will be analysed would have met Anthony since they were both in the same year as Access students, but this apart, they would have had little in common. Liam is single, in his mid-forties, had taken other further education courses, and I knew he had been in prison, though he never disclosed this to me nor to anyone else connected to the course.

He had enrolled on the Science and Technology strand of the 1996 Access course at MIT since there was no place available on the Business and Humanities strand. Moreover, he needed to take mathematics and physics at the equivalent of Leaving Certificate level if he were to cope on a computer programming degree course. Liam, unlike many of his fellow students, knew his way expertly around the Social Security system, but he was very suspicious of the motives of the course organiser (myself), the course tutors, and indeed of the college. Perhaps he ascribed ulterior motives to authority figures in general since we, with others, were regularly brought to task by him for omissions and shortcomings. When complaints were raised at

monthly student/ staff meetings, he was usually the most vociferous complainant.

Academically however, Liam was silent, and would not admit to having problems with the Access course. I was aware from his course tutor that he was finding mathematics difficult and so offered him extra tuition in this and any other subject where he thought it necessary. However he was hostile to the perception that he was experiencing any problems, and it was difficult to ascertain the extent and nature of his difficulty. He also intensely disliked the module on personal development and study skills, which acted to provide a forum between staff and students where difficulties could be discussed. At any rate, he failed mathematics and physics modules, and barely scraped through on the *re-sits*.

His subsequent history was an exemplar of the 'Institutional Response to Access' (Jordan, 1997b). This meant, for example, that contrary to the expectations that the course providers, and our patrons, the European Union would have had (WRC, 1997), the institution could not for political reasons of that time, guarantee third-level college places to students who successfully completed an Access programme. In 1996 the demand for third-level places from school-leavers was such that to have guaranteed these places to mature Access students would have caused great concern in many quarters. The most we could do for our Access students was to state that successful completion of an Access programme would be very advantageous at Mature Student Interviews. That said, we did in fact lobby quite intensively on behalf of our students if they were not initially offered a third-level place at MIT, and generally, the college, albeit reluctantly, acceded to this lobbying.

Liam at Mature Student Interview was not offered a place on a MIT degree in computing. The Access course team also felt that he would not be able to cope with the demands of a full-time, technically-oriented, third-level course, and explained this to him. However, Liam demanded that I take up his cause, and pledged to work very hard to maintain reasonable academic standards. Against my better will, but also feeling that he deserved a chance, I did ask the Registrar that he be admitted to the computing course he had

been turned down for. This was agreed, as a special case, but within a month, he had dropped out, without notifying the full-time course leader or myself. Anecdotal evidence from course tutors points to the fact that he was lost almost at the start, but did not discuss his lack of progress with teaching staff, or other students.

Reflecting on this experience, as the representative of the Access movement within the institute at that time, I did the Access cause no favour by my lobbying. Liam's case became for me an object lesson in not giving in to unrealistic demands. The student has now disappeared from view, but I am concerned that his cynicism will have been strengthened by this episode, and by his failure to gain a qualification he aspired to.

Looking again at these two narratives, one with a successful outcome, the other not, it can be seen that they raise very different types of issue to the previous two. They show on the one hand that physical handicap, though a barrier in terms of finance and administrative procedures can be overcome. It is apparent since the mid-nineties that a process of 'normalisation' is being developed in relation to groups with special needs. In the future perhaps, Anthony will simply be perceived as a student requiring extra assistance, without any need for stereotyping.

Liam's experience suggests the converse and raises gender questions about reasons for the poor or negative educational achievements of disadvantaged males. This has been the subject of much research over the last few years, as has the question of how these negative experiences can be transformed through a greater understanding of masculine cultures, communication styles and appropriate teaching strategies (McGivney, 1999). His experience is also worrying because in a number of significant ways he is from precisely that group at risk of social exclusion and marginalisation which provides a strong justification for Access provision. His story shows that course provision itself is insufficient; there need to be better systems of information, guidance and referral, so that people are not left in a worse situation from that they started with. But the story also suggests that there are social groups who may need very different educational and interpersonal approaches to widening participation than the

formal institutional one that MIT offered, plus an awareness of gender issues.

To sum up, the experience of these students has been used to illuminate the responses to the questions presented in Tables 1-20 by putting flesh on these bones, through using the methodology of triangulation to compare and contrast perspectives provided by the different methods of data collection (McKernan, 1996, p.184). The majority of Access issues raised by the data presented in this chapter relates to the situation of participants, whether external; those relating to participants' life and work situations, or internal; relating to course progress and progression. The most important to emerge from these vignettes however appear to be those dispositional factors, and show that attitudinal and cultural factors may be the strongest determinants of success in progressing on and through higher education.

The final chapter sums up this research and attempts to provide an answer to the research questions which were posed in Chapter 2 of this study together with some analysis of the way forward for Access in Ireland.

Chapter 9. Conclusion: Summary and the Further Development of Access Policy and Practice in Ireland.

This final chapter will consider answers to the research questions posed, through a summary of the main issues raised in the study of the development of Irish Access policy and practice. It will conclude with a SWOT analysis¹ listing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the future development of Irish policy in this area.

In Chapter 2 of the study the main research questions were posed. These ask what have been the main forces driving the emergence of Irish Access policy and provision during the 1990s, and what has been the nature of that provision? Second, what have been the major influences on these forces?

In attempting to answer these questions, the study moves from a consideration of an appropriate methodology in Chapter 2 to an examination of the definitions and rationale for Access in Chapter 3. This leads to a comparative analysis of Access policy and provision in a number of selected countries in Chapters 4 and 5 before examining current Irish Access policy in Chapter 6. Chapters 4 to 6 therefore, provide direct answers to the question about the sources of influence on Irish policy. The latter part of the study - Chapters 7 and 8, report on fieldwork undertaken for this research, including a national survey of Access course providers, and on the outcomes for a selected group of Access students from one institution, which also articulate the experiences of a small number of ex - Access students.

The main issues that emerge from each of these chapters have been highlighted as they relate both to the research questions asked and also as they relate to the future development of Access policy in the State.

Chapter 3 which deals with rationales for Access, firstly highlights the importance of 'compensation theory' as a justification for Access provision.

¹ SWOT is a tool used in change management. (see Ch.2 for a definition).

This is important not only on the grounds that adults may look for such provision to make up for earlier missing educational opportunities in order to improve their career prospects, but also for their own personal development purposes. This in turn suggests that there may be specific groups, looking for 'compensatory opportunities', of whom older adults are a clear example. If the discourse of Access is presented mainly in economic or labour market terms then this group will miss out.

The work of Rawls (1999) goes further than 'compensation' in addressing educational disadvantage. His argument is based on the concept that differences in access to educational opportunity are difficult to justify morally or politically, unless it can be shown that there is a clear benefit to society overall by the maintenance of this difference. Equity therefore involves a fairer distribution of 'primary goods' such as education (ibid., p.92) with an attempt to reduce differences in access by concentrating on the most disadvantaged in society. Rawls's 'equity' concept has been utilised by other important commentators on the Irish and international Access scene. For example, Skilbeck (Skilbeck & Connell, 2000a, p.16), has noted some prevalent instrumental definitions of 'Access' and proposes a re-definition that encompasses the needs of 'equity groups' (ibid.), as well as 'compensatory' needs. He emphasises the role of education in the enrichment of personal life, drawing directly on Rawls's discussion of the value of education in helping individuals formulate their own life plans, and the role of education in the social life of citizens, through their contribution to democratic processes.

Lynch's work (1994, pp.29-30) in pointing out distinctions between concepts of 'equality' and 'equity', and the consequences for individuals and groups of these definitions is also highlighted in this chapter. The theoretical awareness of the need for Access rationales to extend beyond economic and career purposes is borne out by the responses and insights of some Access course participants themselves, who in Chapter 8 relate the outcomes of Access provision, in "changing their lives".

Professor Clancy's recognition that one justification for Access being

couched primarily in economic terms is that it is easier to 'sell' policies presenting such clear and unambiguous outcomes, is noted in Chapter 6, especially in relation to media headlines and presentations of disadvantage in Ireland. Chapter 3 concludes with some observations about the Access debate itself and its relation to adult education discourses.

Chapter 4 provides one answer to the research question asking about sources of influence on Access policy by examining some global trends in education, such as greater state control of education; the growth of the number of adults in higher education and the increasing diversity of higher education provision, all noted by Skilbeck in the 1980's. The latter part of Chapter 4 examines the European Union's influence on Irish Access policy. This has been especially significant since Ireland's public commitment to Access provision only began in 1993 as a 'Response to the Memo on Higher Education' (CEC, 1993) requiring the state to provide Access programmes as an alternative entry to third level (CEC, 1991).

Another identification of the sources of influence on Access policy in Ireland arises from the comparative analysis presented in Chapter 5 of this study. Included here are selected comparative models of the most efficient ways of managing Access provision and of methods of targeting groups and communities rather than simply individuals. The tendency of some social groups to capitalise on educational investment has already been noted, and recurs in this study in the case studies of individual Access students in Chapter 8, though it was commented on in the initial chapter. Policy makers need more efficient methods of targeting resources, but also of empowering communities by allowing them to have a voice in the kind of Access provision they want, rather than simply using a top-down approach. This observation recurs in Chapter 6 in the analysis of the demands of the Irish Working Class Access Network.

Almost two years after this comparative research detailed in Chapter 5 was begun, the HEA commissioned Malcolm Skilbeck to conduct his own comparative analysis of Access policies and practices world wide, in which he clearly points out the 'equity' lessons for Irish policy-makers. This is

critically analysed in Chapter 5 of this study. Skilbeck also identifies the influences on international Access policy, including recent political awareness of the needs of under-represented groups, and current equality legislation and its breaches. Skilbeck's report is important in pointing out that established academic traditions and 'symbolic models of equal opportunity' giving rise to special arrangements, actually inhibit wider participation. Another of Skilbeck's main observations, drawing on an earlier one from a 'Council of Europe Report' of 1996 (Woodrow & Crosier, 1996) is of the dearth of longitudinal studies to track Access students (p.44). It is beyond the remit and timescale of this study to engage fully with longitudinal studies, though Chapter 8 attempts this with one group of students from one Irish institution.

Chapter 6 most directly addresses the question of the sources of influence on Irish Access policy, identifies these, and highlights the many issues arising. It is therefore the most extensive response to the main and secondary research questions. Notable amongst the factors identified are the state's late conversion to Access provision, compared and contrasted with the present vociferous rhetoric on Access raised in many recent policy documents. It also raises the question of the extent to which the government will address some of the more recent forces for change, such as the major recommendations from the most recent Access report (Macnamara, 2001), which draws heavily on Skilbeck's Report. The Macnamara Report recommends the national co-ordination of Access initiatives under the Irish Higher Education Authority; targets for adult students and those with disabilities, the establishment of regional partnerships and increased grant provision for disadvantaged students, a commitment which if realised will create many more opportunities for adults. At the time of writing, the Maintenance Grant is the one area where these recommendations have been acted on by government.

Chapters 7 and 8 of the study shows therefore the way that Access policy has been 'operationalised', and the way that provision has been shaped, from the viewpoint of practitioners - Access Officers /Co-ordinators, and one small group of Access participants. Key issues to emerge in relation to the

survey of national Access provision are of the mechanisms of Access -of the lack of coherence, articulation and recognition of Access awards, as well as of the lack of standardisation of programme curricula and syllabi. Of concern is the fact that some Access courses are pitched at too high an academic level, rather than as an entry to HE. This suggests that issues of quality and standards are required, as another force to impact on Access provision, as happened in England, with the role of the Quality Assurance Agency. Another issue that emerges from this survey is of the unreliability of national statistics in relation to this developing phenomena. There is a need for the HEA, the main body collecting HE statistics, to work with authorities like Professor Clancy (whose work provides the most important data sets on Access to third level in Ireland) to replicate the work of bodies such as HESA (The Higher Education Statistical Agency) in the UK.

Issues arising from Access participants' comments and their experiences of Access provision in Chapter 9, taken with those of the Working Class Access Network (WCAN) from Chapter 6, show that individuals and students represent the least source of influence on Access policy and practice. These issues include a strong awareness of the inflexibility of Access provision to fit work and family life; the importance of integrating Access provision with mainstream college life, and the need for academic staff training in the teaching of adults. Murphy & Inglis's investigation of adults turned down from one of the main Irish universities (2000, p.100-111) suggest that the higher education institutions need both transparency and broader concepts of suitability if they are to make their institutions Access-friendly. This endorses Tight's view, when he called for a variety of measures to promote Access, not simply academic courses, which privilege institutional Access provision (Tight, 1996a, p.66).

To summarise, the short answer to the research questions is that a conflation of economic investment in education; the necessity of social cohesion strategies; membership of the EU; equity awareness, and an increased demand by adults for 'compensatory' education, together with some educational opportunism are the forces driving Access in Ireland. The interest in education as an overarching social good (and panacea) is clearly

demonstrated by the media coverage of Access and widening participation.

As to future Access policy, the SWOT analysis below shows concisely the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats that arise in relation to the expansion of Access opportunities in Ireland.

9.1. Strengths

- i. The economic boom of the late 1990s, leading to government investment in plugging gaps in educational provision.
- ii. Public discourses on Access showing government commitment, and some institutional readiness to change.
- iii. The government is prepared to act speedily on the most recent
- iv. Access report .
- v. There is a greater awareness of widening participation developments elsewhere.
- vi. The 'National Development Plan' (Ir. Govt., 1999) and the
- vii. 'Programme for Prosperity and Fairness' (Ir. Govt., 2000) major economic policy documents, both highlight Access initiatives.

9. 2. Weaknesses

- i. Opposition to Access from traditionalists in HE, especially the universities.
- ii. Universities may be 'let off the hook' too easily by government not rigorously enforcing Access policies.
- iii. There are few effective mechanisms to motivate groups with low literacy and numeracy skills to participate in education.
- iv. The present fragmentation of the further and higher educational sectors.
- v. The tendency of some economically stronger groups to capitalise on educational initiatives offered.
- vi. An emphasis on a 'liberal' individualistic model of education provision, at odds with the targeting of specific social groups or communities.

9. 3. Opportunities

- i. The rationales for Access are both moral and instrumental.
- ii. There is a growing awareness of the dangers caused by social exclusion.
- iii. The dangers posed to the economy by skills shortages.
- iv. The demographic drop in number of school-leavers will impact on HE.
- v. New admissions policies and practices.
- vi. Concerns and measures for retention in the HE sector will benefit Access students.
- vii. The opportunities presented by north - south co-operation as the two jurisdictions move closer together in joint initiatives and policy.
- viii. The most recent Access Report - July 2001 (Macnamara, 2001).

9. 4. Threats

- i. A slump in the economy, leading to government cutbacks.
- ii. *Some quality movement concerns, enforcing over-rigorous curriculum models.*
- iii. A lack of cohesion between two HE sectors - universities and institutes of technology may lead in effect to a two-fold Access system.
- iv. Access provision may be focused in one group of institutions, the institutes of technology, as has happened in the 'new' UK universities.
- v. No free funding is available for part-time adult education courses.
- vi. A growing research emphasis in the institute of technology sector, leading to a pre-occupation with research funding and initiatives.
- vii. Access is not a glamorous activity for HE institutions wanting a high profile.

This completes the SWOT analysis which has been intentionally presented in numbered form, so that the key points emerge more clearly. Finally, I wish to indicate some Access prerequisites, provision, and post-Access requirements which have been drawn from a number of sources identified in this research, and from my own reflections on the data presented here.

9. 5. Pre- requisites for effective Access provision

- i. Clarification of the age and definition of the 'mature student.'
- ii. National co-ordination, with the appointment of a national co-ordination unit.
- iii. Research, including longitudinal research, into the effectiveness of
- iv. Access provision in Ireland.
- v. An examination of best practice elsewhere in relation to Access, particularly into 'alternative' Access models.
- vi. Adequate and sustained national funding.
- vii. Regional co-ordinated Access partnerships to target specific groups.

9. 6. Access provision

- i. Diversity of provision and of Access routes.
- ii. Performance indicators at a number of levels to monitor the progress of policy implementation.
- iii. Standards to ensure comparability and quality across a range of Access provision.
- iv. Recognition and guarantees of the status of the Access qualification.
- v. Minimising the financial barriers to Access through realistic and mandatory grants to Access students.
- vi. A range of student supports for Access, so that there is Access through, into and out of higher education.
- vii. An awareness of the Access needs of special students.
- viii. Use of the further education sector in Access provision.
- ix. A recognition that Access qualifications may have a currency in their own right, as in France.
- x. Integration with mainstream course provision.
- xi. Good quality educational guidance.

9.7. Post Access

- i. A recognition that Access courses should have real worth in guaranteeing admission to selected courses.
- ii. Transparent mechanisms for admission to higher education.
- iii. Coherent credit framework systems and of the use of APL in promoting entry to HE.

- iv. The allocation of generous quotas for adult students' progression.
- v. Mentors to maintain links with the student throughout higher education.
- vi. Effective tracking of students by institutions.

Concluding comment

This research study has taken place in tandem with an explosion of activity in local and national policy initiatives for the disadvantaged here in Ireland, including the expansion of Access programmes and practitioner networks. The nature of this activity has been frenetic, with reports on disadvantage tumbling down every other week, and has led to a re-focusing; to a close mapping and analysing these developments, and my own role in this as an action researcher, but with more attention to the national scene than I had originally intended. It is also an unfinished story. In three months time, the Irish Access scene will be different and in a year it may well have transformed itself. What can be claimed for this research therefore is that it records a short period in time when Access was a much talked-of concept, and policy was just beginning to cohere, as in Parry's report of the second phase of Access activity in the UK (Parry, 1996).

As an action research investigation this should, were the complete action research cycle to be followed, lead to a new cycle of research, in which following the identification of the problem experienced by the practitioner/researcher, some improvement or a new cycle of action would begin and be in turn evaluated (Zuber-Skerrit, 1990, p.69). As I stated in Chapter 1, I am no longer involved as a practitioner in this area, but the SWOT analysis does suggest some new action to be taken on board, which would then need to be evaluated. The developments of structures for Access proposed in the SWOT analysis suggest that the phenomenon is not simply a feature of a particular time or place, but will become an established feature of the educational scene in Ireland.

In terms of reflecting on what has been achieved in this research, some of it has seemed like a commonplace recording of the factual and well-known, as in the analysis of Irish government policy of Chapter 6. I do feel however

that the analysis of European policy in Chapter 4, has helped to make sense of Irish developments, and presents a clear pattern of increasing EU involvement in the areas of educational disadvantage and educational equity. *The comparative analysis of Chapter 5, which when begun in 1998* promised to be a innovative element of the research, has in the end been usurped by Skilbeck's more comprehensive exploration, so much of the focus has been changed here to a discussion of Skilbeck's work.

One area that has become more interesting in suggesting lines for further investigation is that of the rationales for Access. It appears that Access is developing into a new area of educational theory, drawing on a number of diverse knowledge bases and discourses, all needing analysis and categorisation, as they do in the much larger field of adult education. These discourses also require more extensive investigation and analysis.

Finally, the narrative explorations of the experiences of a small number of Access students have been the easiest to write and analyse, but are also in the end more promising in their uncovering of issues than the surveys of Chapters 8 and 9 whose value lay mostly in the confirmation what was already known. Were I to begin again today, it is these experiences on which I should concentrate.

Appendix 1.
Chapter 7 Tables

7.1. Access Providers and Location

Table 7.1a. Access Course Providers

Course Location	Frequency
Dublin (capital)	11
Galway (west)	4
Waterford (south east)	2
Cork (south)	1
Athlone (midlands)	1
Total	19

Table 7. 1b. Access Course Location

Course Location	Frequency
Dublin (capital)	11
Galway (west)	4
Waterford (south east)	2
Cork (south)	1
Athlone (midlands)	1
Total	19

7. 2. Inception of Course

Table 7. 2. Date of Course Inception

Years in Existence	Frequency
10+ years	1
5-9 years	7
1-4 years	9
n/a	2
Total	19

7. 3. Mode of Course Delivery

Table 7. 3. Mode of Course Delivery

Mode of Delivery	Frequency
Full-time day	10
Part-time day	7
Part-time evening	2
Total	19

7. 4 Study Time, Originating Sector and Mode of Delivery

Tables 7. 4a. and 7. 4b. Study Time, Originating Sector and Mode of Delivery

Table 7. 4a. Contact Hours for Participants

Contact Hours per Week	Sector	Mode	Frequency
18-22hrs.	HE & FE	Full-time	9
9 – 17hrs.	HE	Part-time	6
1 - 8hrs	HE	Part-time	3
n/a	n/a	n/a	1
Total			19

Table 7. 4b.
Self-Study Hours for Participants

Self-Study Hours per Week	Sector	Mode	Frequency
18-22hrs.	HE & FE	Full-time	2
9 – 17hrs.	HE	Part-time	6
1 - 8hrs	HE	Part-time	3
n/a	n/a	n/a	8
Total			19

7. 5. Typology of Participants

Table 7. 5. Participant Type

Target Group	Frequency
All adults	9
Disadvantaged adults	10
Total	19

7. 6. Academic Level of Course and Qualification-Awarding Body

Table 7. 6. Academic Course Level and Qualification-Awarding Body

Academic Course Level	Validating Body	Frequency
National Foundation Certificate	NCEA	10
None	None	4
Between LC & 1st yr. univ.	University	3
First yr. university	University	2
Total		19

7. 7. Progression and Guaranteed Places

Table 7. 7. Progression and Guaranteed Places

Guarantee of Place	Frequency
Guarantees place in own college	5
Guarantees place elsewhere	0
Improves chances of entry only	14
Total	19

7. 8. Subjects Studied

Table 7. 8. Number of Subjects Studied

No. of Subjects Studied	Frequency
10+	1
5-9	17
1-5	0
n/a	1
Total	19

7. 9. Core Subjects and Electives

Table 7. 9. Rank Order of Core and Elective Subjects

Core Subjects	Frequency	Rank Order	Electives	Frequency	Rank Order
Study Skills	11	1	No electives	8	1
Information Tech.	11	1	Sociology	4	2
Numeracy	10	3	English	4	2
Writing Skills	10	3	Business Studies	4	2
Guidance	5	5	Psychology	4	2

7. 10. Examination Success Rate for Access Course Participants

Table 7. 10. Successful Access Course Participants

Examination Pass Rates	Frequency
100%	4
90-99%	3
80-89%	2
70-79%	4
n/a	6
Total	19

7. 11. Attrition Rate of Access Course Participants

Table 7. 11. Access Course Drop-out Rate

% of Participants Dropping out	Frequency
0%	1
10-15%	6
16-30%	5
31-50%	1
51% +	0
n/a	6
Total	19

7. 12. Access Course Participants Gaining Higher Education Places

Table 7. 12. Higher Education Destination of Students.

Destination of Participants	No. of Participants	% of Participants
Own H.E. institution	272	46%
Other H.E. institutions	73	12%
Vocational training	3	1%
No information available	249	41%
Total	597	100%

7. 13. Student Support: Mentoring

Table 7. 13. Mentoring Systems

Mentoring System in Place	Frequency
Yes	7
Some support	5
None	7
Total	19

7. 14. Problems of Access Students

Table 7. 14. Ranking of Access Student Problems

Category of Problem	Frequency	Rank Order
Study skills	13	1
Lack of confidence	8	2
Subject difficulties	5	3
Finance	2	4
No problems	1	5

7.15 Funding

Table 7. 15. Funding

Funding Source	Frequency
College's own budget	6
Self-funding by students	5
EU initiatives	2
Dept. of Ed. (VTOS)	2(+1)
HEA targeted funding	2
n/a	1
Total	19

Appendix 2.
Chapter 8 Tables

8. 1a. Numbers on Access Courses

Table 8. 1. Access Groups Surveyed

Group	Year	No. of Students	Characteristics
EU Horizon	1996	20	Disadvantaged adults
WIT Access	1998	16	All adults
EU Sesame	1998	12	Work-based learners
WIT Access	1999	20	Adults
Total		68	

8. 2a. Attrition Figures

Table 8. 2. Drop-out from Access Course

Year	No. of Drop-outs	Course %	Reasons	Frequency
1996	0	0		0
1998a	3	20%	Course too hard	1
			Accident	1
			Childcare	1
1998b	0	0		0
1999	6	30%	Unfulfilled expectations	2
			Childcare	1
			Attendance Problems	1
			Lost interest	1
			Bereavement	1
Total	9	12% (av.)		9

8. 3a. Current Situation of Access Graduates

Table 8. 3. Current Situation of Access Graduates

Situation	Frequency
Further study	41
Full & part-time employment	22
Seeking employment	6
Work experience	0
Training scheme	1
Family/carer	2

1

¹ Graduates may appear in more than one category e.g. seeking employment and studying.
No totals are therefore given for this table.

8. 4a. Educational Destination of Access Graduates

Table 8. 4. College/ Course Attended on Completion of Found. Course

College	Course	No
Oscail	BA Humanities (Dist. Ed.)	1
Fás	Microsoft Certified Professional	1
St. John's College of Further Ed. Cork	NCVA 2. Filmmaking	1
Univ. College, Cork	BA Social Science	2
Ditto	Cert. Health & Safety	1
Ditto	Diploma Professional Studies (p/t)	1
Waterford Voc. Ed. Committee	Computer Programming	1
WIT	BA Administration	1
Ditto	Nat. Cert. Legal Studies	3
Ditto	Nat. Dip. Legal Studies	1
Ditto	BA Legal & Business Studies	1
Ditto	Nat. Cert. Business Studies	5
Ditto	Bachelor of Business Studies	1
Ditto	Cert. Environ. Management(p/t)	1
Ditto	Childhood & Society Studies(p/t)	1
Ditto	Fine Art and Drawing (p/t)	1
Ditto	Found. Cert.Child & Social Studies	1
Ditto	Nat.Cert. Applied Science	1
Ditto	Nat. Cert. Commercial Computing	1
Ditto	Nat. Cert. Computer Applications	4
Ditto	Nat. Cert. Electronic Engineering	2
Ditto	Nat. Cert. Industrial Computing	1
Ditto	Nat. Cert. Manufact. Tech. (p/t)	1
Ditto	Nat.Cert.Multimed.Applic.& Dev.	2
Ditto	Nat. Dip.App.Soc.Stud.(Soc. Care)	3
Ditto	Nat.Cert. IT Support	2
Total		41

8. 5a. Awards Received by Access Graduates

Table 8. 5. Awards Sought and Awards Received

Course Description	Nos. Sought	Nos. Received
BA in Administration	1	
BA in Humanities (Dist. Ed.)	1	
BA in Social Studies (WIT)	1	
BA Social Science (UCC)	2	
NC, ND & Bach. Business Studies	6	
NC Computer Applications	2 Nat. Cert.	2
Dipl.& Degree in Prof. Studies (UCC)	1 Diploma	1
NC & ND in Legal Studies	3 Nat. Cert. 2 Nat. Dip.	1
Microsoft Certification Professional	1	1
NC Electronic Engineering	2	
NC in Applied Science	1	
NC in IT Support	2	
NC in Multimedia Application	2	1
NCVA Film-making	1	
ND App.Social Science in Social Care	2	
ND in Commercial Computing	1 Nat. Cert.	1
NC in Industrial Computing		1
Cert. in Health and Safety		1
Total	31	9

8. 6a. Reasons for Not Engaging in Further Study

Table 8. 6. Access Students Not Engaged in Further Study.

Reasons	Rank Order	Frequency
Family commitments	1	6
Dropped out of course	2	4
Failed exams	3	2
Full-time employment / shiftworking	4	2
Ill health / bereavement	5	2
Study too difficult	6	1
Deferred place	6	1
Finance	6	1
Didn't integrate with younger students	6	1
No room on desired course	6	1
Only got pass in course studied – insufficient to continue to Diploma	6	1
Too late in applying for course	6	1
Total		23

8. 7a. Intention to Resume Study

Table 8.7. Intention of Those Not Engaged in Further Study to Resume Studies

Intention	Yes	No	Maybe	N/a
Resume studies	14	2	2	5
Total	14	2	2	5

8. 8a. Subjects Cited for Further Study

Table 8. 8. Desired Subjects Areas by Those Not at Present Studying

Subject Area	Frequency
Job-related subjects	11
Academic	7
Personal Development	2
Total	20

8. 9a. Employment Gained by Access Graduates

Table 8. 9. Current Employment Status of Former Access Students

Description	Job Gained	Work-based Learners
Administrative Assistant		X
Community TV Programme Researcher		X
Craftsman		X
Customer Service Representative	X	
Customer Support Representative	X	
Deputy President, Students Union	X	
Glass-cutter		XXX
Helpdesk Engineer	X	
Master Wedgecutter		X
Part-time Art Teacher	X	
Photographer	X	
Sandblaster		X
Stemware Examiner		X
Youth Information Officer	X	
Semi-skilled Operator		XXX
Secretary	X	
Self-employed Manager, Introduction Agency	X	
N/a		
Total	9	13

8. 10a. Relevance of Access Studies to Employment

Table 8. 10. Relevance of Access Course to Present Employment

Description	Yes	No	Unsure
Essential for job	<u>3</u>	11	
Relevant	11	<u>2</u>	1
Total	14	13	1

8. 11a. Benefits of Access Studies

Table 8. 11. Benefits of Attending Access Course

Benefits	Rank Order	Frequency
Opportunity to return to education	1	20
Gain in confidence	2	19
Preparation for college life	3	17
Acquisition of study skills	4	13
Contact with others	5	8
Changed life	6	7
Good experience	7	6
Personal growth and credibility	7	6
Revision of subjects not studied for long time	8	4
Learned about Physics and Maths	9	3
Interaction between students and tutors	9	3
Felt alive intellectually	10	2
Being in college environment	10	2
Gained entrepreneurial skills	10	2
Lecturers encouraging	10	2
Acquisition of basic IT knowledge	11	1
Provided ability to focus	11	1
Acquired interpersonal skills	11	1
Subjects all came together at end	11	1
Independent learning	11	1
Diversity in subject matter	11	1
Better understanding of business	11	1
All students had equal knowledge at end	11	1
Helped with family plans	11	1
Small class size and individual attention	11	1
Benefit in all areas	11	1
Relevant	11	1

8. 12a. Disadvantages of Access Course

Table 8. 12. Disadvantages of Access Course

Disadvantages	Rank Order	Frequency
Subjects too basic	1	8
Maths not adequately taught	2	6
Students mollycoddled/patronised	2	6
Isolation of course from main college	3	5
Subjects / course too broad	3	5
Hard to see the use of the course	5	3
Weak on progression information & routes	5	3
People at different academic levels	5	3
Family life suffered	6	2
Duration of course too intense	6	2
Some lecturers unaware how to deal with adults	6	2
Student support poor	6	2
Problems with aggressive students	7	1
Travelling to course	7	1
Too much of subject Communication	7	1
Examinations	7	1
Not shown how to improve essay writing	7	1
Too long between modules	7	1
Poor organisation in Science/Tech. Stream	7	1
Course not well-focused	7	1
Not prepared for reality of life in mainstream	7	1
Subject 'Personal development' not relevant	7	1
Difficult to integrate with work	7	1
No access to computers	7	1
Too many assignments	7	1
Award not graded	7	1
Course doesn't reach disadvantaged	7	1

8. 13a. Recommendations for Access Course

Table 8. 13. Recommendations re. Access Course

Recommendations	Rank	Frequency
Improve study skills module	1	3
Childcare facilities necessary	1	3
Better computer facilities necessary	1	3
More info. on CAO and progression needed	2	2
Run course over longer time period (Sesame)	2	2
More co-ord. between mainstream & Access courses	2	2
Ethnic groups should be encouraged to apply	3	1
More liaison with industry necessary	3	1
All classes should be held in one location	3	1
Include interview techniques in course	3	1
More emphasis needed on lab. Work	3	1
Students should be made aware of campus facilities	3	1
Have more day classes (Sesame)	3	1
Have Foundation (Access) course in IT	3	1
Reduce hours per week of course	3	1
Include more job- relevant subjects	3	1
More homework should be set	3	1
Science and Tech. course should run every year	3	1
Include Business aspect to Science course	3	1
Access students should be Student Union members	3	1
More tutorials necessary	3	1
Clear statement needed of what course will lead to	3	1
More group outings necessary	3	1
More awareness of grants needed	3	1
Some full days should be included	3	1
More tutor communication necessary	3	1
Course should be more competitive	3	1
Class sizes should be kept small	3	1
Increase no. of adults in college-incentive to others	3	1
Use one Maths book	3	1
Have an equal gender balance	3	1
Assess students before course begins	3	1

Question 8. 1b.

8. 14. Relevance of Course Content

Table 8. 14. Relevance of Course Content

Group	Comment
A	Good introduction to college / Maths difficult – more needed/ Applied Computing needed. Business / Humanities stream unbalanced – more Humanities needed/ Subject Communications relevant. Trip to Spain very beneficial.
B	Good overall view of subjects and how College works/ Business Studies course content not relevant for Legal Studies students and others.
C	Relevant to educational progress in general but not within company. Only Business, and not Engineering Maths available.
D	Good for study skills and preparation for mainstream courses/ Need wider view of where course fits into whole picture/Maths very useful.

Question 8. 2b.

8. 15. Assessment Strategies Used on Access Courses

Table 8. 15. Assessment Strategies on Access Courses

Group	Comment
A	More short tests necessary/ Course didn't prepare students for writing long essays.
B	More short tests and feedback necessary.
C	Not enough feedback on assignments/ More sensitivity in marking assignments needed in the early stages of the course.
D	Assignments were given too late in the course/ Students should know more about the number of assessments for each subject/ A good idea to have examinations, and under the same examination conditions as for full-time students.

Question 8. 3b.

8. 16. Teaching Styles on Access Courses

Table 8. 16. Teaching Styles on Access Courses

Group	Comment
A	Teaching sometimes appeared to have no structure/ days out from the course would have been welcome.
B	Encourage use of library for research.
C	Teaching appropriate overall (open-minded, focussed, interactive) though one lecturer used an inappropriate authoritarian style.
D	Good to experience various styles/ Note-taking not necessary.

8. 17. Student Support for Access Students

Table 8. 17. Level of Student Support for Access Students

Group	Comment
A	Adequate - personal tutors very welcome/ The personal tutor should follow students into fulltime courses.
B	Mentors should continue into mainstream.
C	Mentors were promised but not provided.
D	Better to be on main campus/ Mentoring and one- to- one counselling important.

1. 18. Finance

Table 8. 18. Funding and Financial Support

Group	Comment
A	Difficulties with Social Welfare.
B	Students should be encouraged to actively seek entitlements.
C	The Company is unlikely to support the course in the future again because of its impact on shift systems
D	A grant should be available for the course/ Information on entitlements should be available/ Not having to buy books was a great benefit. Childcare needs to be supported.

19. Personal Development Potential of Access Courses

Table 8. 19. Potential of Course for Personal Development

Group	Comment
A	Course turned life around/More confidence/helped in questioning system/Start course with personal development and group work.
B	Confidence.
C	Confidence about education & appetite to go further/ Mystery gone/Developed social skills/ Enabled one to ask questions and become more articulate.
D	Confidence, self-esteem building.

Question 8. 7b.

8. 20. Information on Educational Progression

Table 8. 20. Guidance for Further Study or Employment

Group	Comment
A	Stress the guidance role of all lecturers/More information was needed on progression to mainstream courses.
B	-
C	Adequate for those in employment.
D	Inadequate/ Educate the educators about the course/ More information on progression routes needed.

8. 21. Recommendations

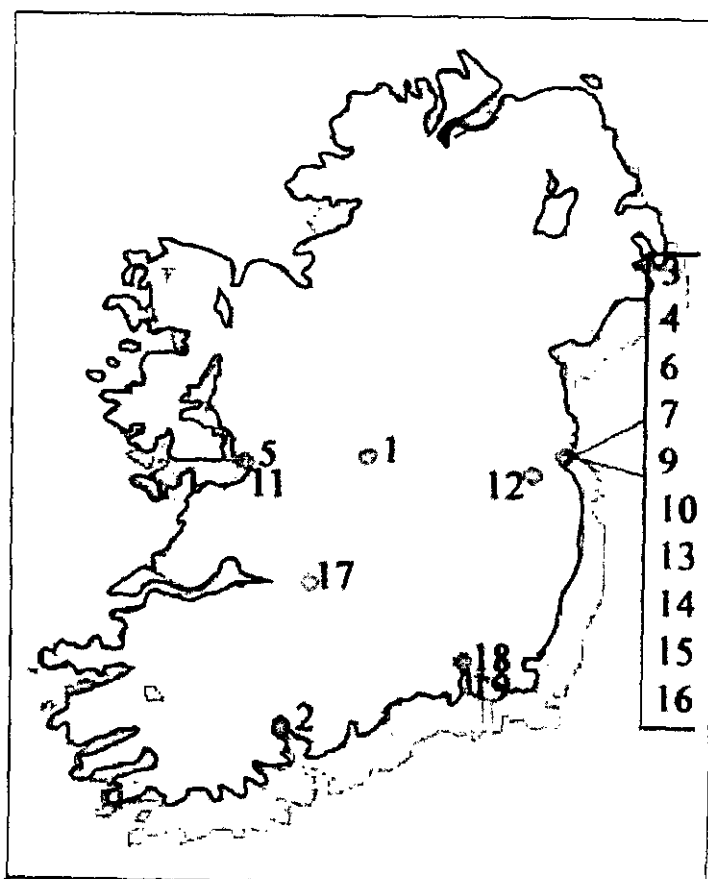
Table 8. 21. Recommendations

Group	Comment
A	Let students sit in on mainstream classes. Lecturers from mainstream courses should talk to Access students.
B	-
C	More interaction with mainstream college courses and students necessary/Flexibility necessary in provision of course - more family friendly courses/ Industrial links need to be more prominent Increase Mature Student quota.
D	Have talk from previous year Access student early on in course/ Have students sit in on 3 rd . level courses.

Appendix 3

List of Institutions with Access Provision in 1999

1. Athlone Institute of Technology
2. Cork Institute of Technology
3. Dublin City University
4. Dun Laoghaire Institute for Art, Design and Technology, Co. Dublin
5. Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology
6. Greater Blanchardstown Development Project, Dublin
7. Institute of Technology, Tallaght, Dublin
8. Institute of Technology, Tralee
9. *Mater Dei* Institute of Education, Dublin
10. National College of Ireland, Dublin
11. National University of Ireland, Galway
12. National University of Ireland, Maynooth (Dublin)
13. Pearse College, Crumlin, Dublin
14. Plunket College, Dublin
15. Trinity College, Dublin
16. University College, Dublin
17. University of Limerick/Limerick Institute of Technology
18. Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)
19. Waterford Crystal/WIT



Appendix 4

Survey of Outcomes

Access Course Students 1. Further Study

1. What is the title and location of the course or the programme undertaken, and what result did you gain in the last examination you took?

2. What do you intend to do next?

3. Was the Access course beneficial to you in your further study?

4. Were there ways in which the Access course was not beneficial to you in your further study?

5. To what extent was the Access Course helpful to you in deciding what course to take?

6. Which subjects on the Access Course were the best introduction to the subsequent course you studied?
7. Which subjects on the Access Course were the poorest introduction to the subjects you studied?
8. Can you comment on the level of subjects studied on the Access Course: too hard, too easy, just about right?
9. How well did the Access Course prepare you for:
 - a) Assessments?
 - b) Examinations?
10. How well did the Access Course provide you for:
 - a) the approaches of third-level lecturers?
 - b) teaching methods at third level?

11. Please comment on the usefulness of the following supports on the
Access Course:

a) *Mentoring*

b) *Study skills*

c) *Guidance*

d) *Foreign trip*

e) *Extra tutorial help*

f) *other*

12. Would you have welcomed any other support?

13. What improvements would you suggest to the Access Course for the future?

Thank you for your help,

Anne Jordan

Educational Development Centre

Access Course Students 2. Other

1. What have you been doing since completing the Access course?
2. What would you like to do in the future?
3. Do you have any intentions with regard to further study?
4. Looking back, what for you were the main benefits of the Access course?
5. Were there any ways in which the Access course was not beneficial?
6. To what extent was the Access course helpful to you in deciding what to do next?
7. Which subjects on the Access course did you find the most relevant?

8. Which subjects on the Access course did you find the least relevant?

9. Which subjects on the Access course did you find the least relevant?

10. Can you comment on the level of subjects studied on the Access course:
(too hard, too easy, about right)

11. Please comment on the usefulness of the following supports on the
Access course:

a) Mentoring

b) Study skills

c) Guidance

d) Foreign trip

e) Extra tutorial help

f) Other

12. Would you have welcomed any other support?

13. What improvements would you suggest to the Access Course for the future?

Thank you for your help,

Anne Jordan

Educational Development Centre

Appendix 5.

Access Foundation Certificate Courses: Questions for Focus Group Facilitators

Please discuss the following with your year group. Examples, case studies or stories are particularly useful in making a point.

1. The relevance of the course content (very relevant, not very relevant, just right?).

2. Assessment strategies used on the Foundation Course (continuous assessment and final examinations).

3. Teaching styles (appropriate/ inappropriate?).

4. Levels of student support on the Foundation Course programme (too much, too little, just right?).

5. Funding and financial support (manageability or hardship?).

6. The potential of the course for personal development (if so, how? opportunities missed?).

7. Guidance for further study or employment (adequate/inadequate?).

8. Recommendations

Thank you

Anne Jordan
Educational Development Centre

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